



# HOLLYWOOD ON THE HUDSON

Film and Television in New York from Griffith to Sarnoff

Richard Koszarski



# **HOLLYWOOD on the HUDSON**



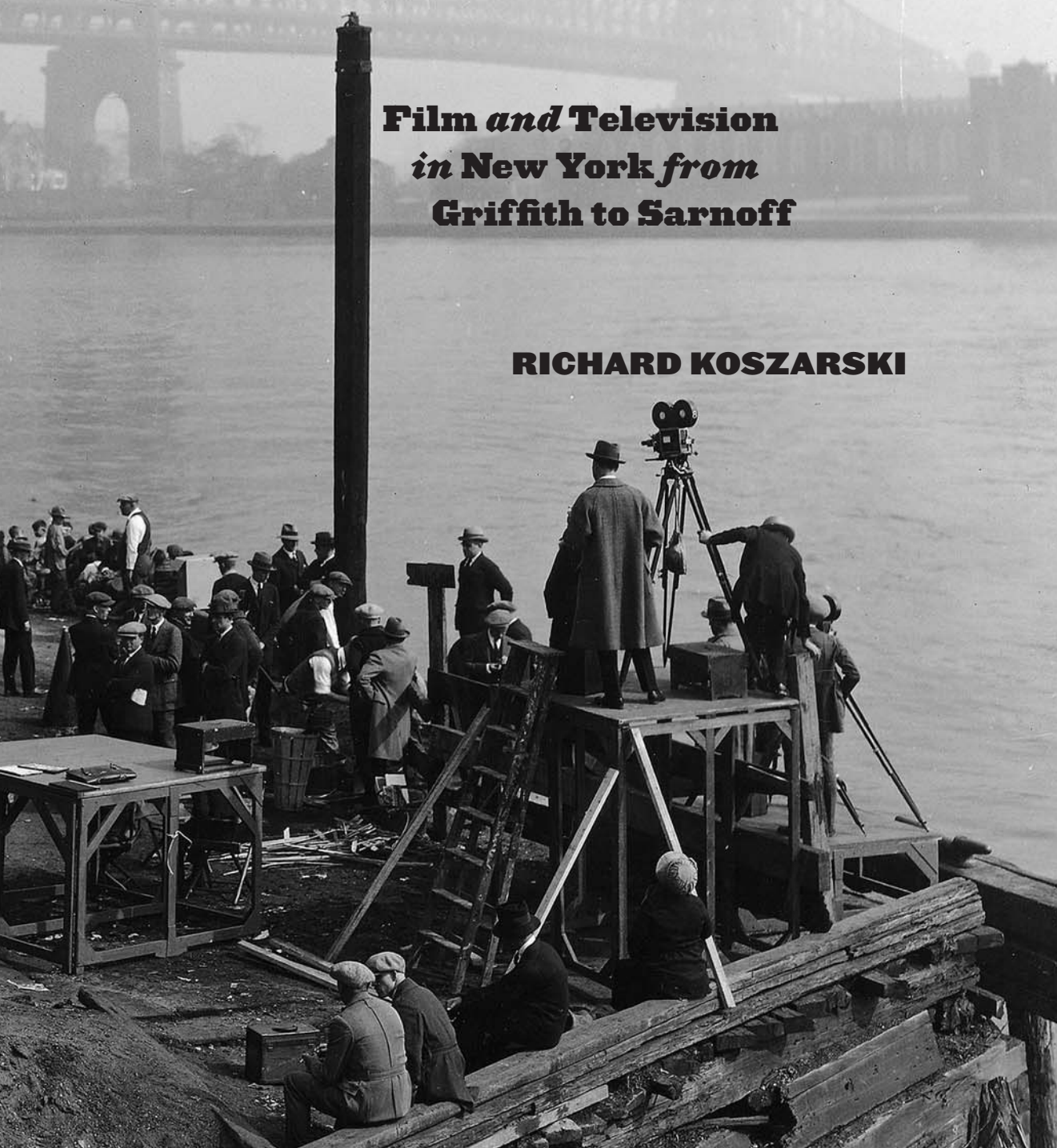
CONSUM

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# **HOLLYWOOD** **on the HUDSON**

**Film and Television  
in New York from  
Griffith to Sarnoff**

**RICHARD KOSZARSKI**





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Frontispiece: *Big Brother* (1923) filming on location in New York City. Bison Archives.

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

New York filmmaking has always been more than just another business. A localized cultural product drawing on the same creative roots that nourished the city's art, theater, and music, films made here reflect the contributions of a very broad cultural community, not just the thousands of men and women officially drawing a paycheck.

The photograph on this page was probably taken in the summer of 1938, when Audio Productions was operating the Eastern Service Studio in Astoria. The man on the left is my father, Casimir J. Koszarski, a neighborhood resident posing for a snapshot with a visiting friend. The location he chose was the colonnaded exterior of the great motion picture studio built by Paramount in 1920, still a familiar local landmark.

He had been born in Manhattan in 1911, when D. W. Griffith was still filming one-reelers in the streets of the city for the Biograph Company. His father, a stone mason, later worked on movie sets in Fort Lee, New Jersey. But at the time this picture was taken, my father was probably no more interested in the business end of motion pictures than any other New Yorker.

Another local resident, Ethel Merman, remembered how the neighborhood kids would gather outside the studio and watch the limousines arrive, gaping as Adolphe Menjou and Gilda Gray made grand entrances. The movies may have been exotic, but they were still within reach. So Merman did not have to go to Hollywood to pursue her dream of stardom, and within a few years she was making films inside this studio herself. Millions had the same dream, but for a New Yorker, achieving them was a local option like any other.

That's also the way things worked out for the man in the photograph. My father eventually became a film importer, buying the rights to Polish films and exhibiting them to local audiences on an ethnic circuit that swung from Greenpoint,



Brooklyn, to Jersey City, New Jersey. And in his own way he also got inside that neighborhood studio, because he stored those films just next door in what was once the Paramount Film Lab. That was almost forty years after the picture was taken. Soon after, in an even more theatrical coincidence, I began working for the Astoria Motion Picture and Television Center Foundation, a not-for-profit entity created to restore and reopen the now abandoned studio building. For most of the 1980s my third-floor office was directly above the spot on which my father stands.

I knew about the picture before beginning my research for this book, but without an understanding of local history—film history as well as family history—I didn't really understand it. So I have put it here as a reminder. This book will not be about the "image" of New York as created and controlled by filmmakers who lived and worked somewhere else. Nor will it simply be a history of local films and film studios, although that story certainly needs to be told. Instead, like any account of Broadway, Tin Pan Alley, or the Greenwich Village artists' colony of the 1920s, it will try to understand the movies made here in terms of the specific urban culture that produced them. And that is not the way anyone would, or could, write a history of Hollywood.

For sharing with me their experiences of making movies in New York in the 1920s and 1930s, I want to thank the local filmmakers who spoke with me over the years, especially Constance Binney, Louise Brooks, Serafina Burgos, Viola Dana, Allan Dwan, Herb Edelman, George Folsey, Lee Garmes, Caroline Gutknecht, Rudy Koubek, Jesse Lasky Jr., Anita Loos, Aline MacMahon, Don Malkames, Hal Mohr, Peter J. Mooney, Joseph Ruttenberg, Leo Seltzer, and Grant Whytock.

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My students in “History of the New York Motion Picture Industry” at The School of Visual Arts, Columbia University, New York University, and Rutgers University deserve considerable credit for helping to shape the earliest drafts of these arguments and for sitting through so many of those films.

My family: especially Diane and Eva, who have lived with this project for twenty or thirty years, depending on who’s counting; my brother Ted and sisters Maria and Elizabeth; and my mother, Janina Koszarski, who continues to maintain the instincts of a true film historian.

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And finally, and in many ways most centrally, a man whose contribution to New

#### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

York's film history is as little known as the wonders of that history itself: Sam Robert. In a 1980 *New York Times* profile headlined "The Man Who Kept Astoria in the Movies," Sam was cited for his work as a local union activist and a force behind the reopening of the Paramount Astoria studio. But just as important, starting in the early 1960s, this visionary was taping oral histories with New York's silent film workers. While the founders of the Astoria Motion Picture Foundation all wanted to reopen the stages, Sam was the one who understood that if film production in New York was going to have a future, we certainly needed to understand its past.

AUGUST 2007

# **HOLLYWOOD on the HUDSON**



Hollywood's image of New York, ca. 1933.  
The "studio on Long Island" where Ann  
Darrow used to work was just across the  
East River, to the right of the Empire  
State Building.



# Introduction

At the beginning of *King Kong* (1933), perhaps the greatest New York film ever made in Hollywood, Robert Armstrong is prowling the streets of Manhattan, a director of documentaries in desperate need of “a pretty face” for his new jungle epic. It is the bottom of the Depression, and the streets of the city seem as threadbare as the inhabitants. The lineup at the local soup kitchen has nothing to offer, but Armstrong is in luck when he spots Fay Wray stealing an apple from Paul Porcasi’s fruit stand. It seems she is not just any unemployed New Yorker but an out-of-work movie actress. “I used to do extra work now and then over on Long Island,” she tells him. “The studio’s closed now.” Indeed.

This bit of dialogue is one of the only references to the New York motion picture industry ever made in a Hollywood film. And with more than the usual vindictiveness, it recalls an especially bleak moment during the winter of 1932, when Paramount finally pulled the plug on its massive Long Island studio operation.<sup>1</sup> That day seemed the final triumph of Hollywood in its twenty-year production rivalry with the East Coast studios. There would be no more sharing of budgets, contract talent, or bragging rights, no more invidious comparisons between East and West Coast lifestyles or production methods. The studio system had taken a long time to die in the East, even if the rest of the local motion picture business had refused to die with it.

The winter of 1932 was indeed a bad time for East Coast production, but the date marks a cyclic low point, not the end of an industry. Moviemaking in New York had always been a seasonal activity, responding first to changes in the weather, then to

the changing demands of mass production. It had been like this since the nickel-odeon era and would continue to ebb and flow into the twenty-first century, always adapting to new conditions while pioneering innovative technologies, genres, and production methods. Soon even Fay Wray and Robert Armstrong would be making movies in New York—the real New York, not Hollywood’s grim facsimile—she as the star of Dashiell Hammett’s *Woman in the Dark* (1934), he in the wisecracking romance *Gigolette* (1935).<sup>2</sup>

But few people noticed. By then, Hollywood was not just the most familiar outpost of the American motion picture industry: for all practical purposes, it was synonymous with that industry, a factory town that had established its supremacy in less than a decade. Before 1907 there had been no regular production at all in southern California; by 1915, 80 percent of American films were made in and around Los Angeles. Within a few more years the American motion picture industry would become as closely identified with Hollywood as the automobile business with Detroit or rubber production with Akron. In fact, only a few studios were located in Hollywood proper, with the rest scattered from Santa Barbara to Culver City to the San Fernando Valley. But it was Hollywood that soon became the generic location, not only for southern California filmmaking, but for the entire American film industry.

There were good reasons for the creation of this factory town, including the weather, the landscape, and the generally low wage scales, which could be kept low thanks to the state’s notorious anti-union policies. Filmmaking was a labor-intensive business; with 35 percent of production budgets expended on salaries, a few dollars a week less for each carpenter or electrician could add up quickly.<sup>3</sup> But there was something else about Hollywood, beyond the grubby details of minimal wage rates or real estate values. Almost from the beginning, the Hollywood name itself had become a selling point, a trademark that added value to the products it generated. Just as the promotion of actors into stars helped build audience interest in them and their work, so the extraordinary ballyhoo touting Hollywood as “the beckoning El Dorado . . . Metropolis of Make-Believe in the California hills” turned an ordinary factory address into a synonym for glamour for audiences around the world.<sup>4</sup>

This promotional campaign appears to have started as a simple manifestation of local boosterism, fueled largely by the Hollywood branch of the Security Trust and Savings Bank.<sup>5</sup> The film industry and the local real estate boom developed synergistically, movie production being favored as a relatively nonpolluting industry that required large amounts of land and labor. But many local towns in the 1920s launched such campaigns. What happened in Hollywood was that the industry itself, and those attracted to it, became caught up in its own self-promotion. Screenwriter Perley Poore Sheehan, author of *Hollywood as a World Center*, really did believe that Hollywood was “the new Jerusalem,” the “ultimate expression” of Western civilization.<sup>6</sup>

When it was pointed out that Hollywood was actually a cultural wasteland with no professional theater, university, museum, or art gallery, the locals merely circled the wagons. When the town itself came under moral criticism in the wake of such tabloid scandals as the Roscoe “Fatty” Arbuckle affair, it began celebrating its “twenty-two churches.”<sup>7</sup> Work on the Hollywood image went into high gear. Indeed, a concerted effort to define and defend this image would become one of the most recognizable aspects of Hollywood filmmaking. In the 1980s the Smithsonian Institution circulated an exhibition of artifacts and memorabilia called “Hollywood: Legend and Reality” as a way of illustrating how Hollywood had created and sold some of the most powerful modern myths of the twentieth century. The subject was the making of films, but it might just as easily have been the making of Hollywood itself. Movie audiences and readers of fan magazines bought this fantasy as eagerly as any news of Garbo or Gable.<sup>8</sup>

In the end, it made little difference whether or not Hollywood was a den of iniquity (as some reformers thought), a sleepy backwater (as its resident New York contingent would have it), or the dynamic center of the century’s most potent art industry. For better or worse, the more that was said about Hollywood, the more the word itself became synonymous with American cinema as a whole. Even more than “Detroit,” the invocation “Hollywood” conjured up a product, a style, and a state of mind. As Webster’s has it: “Hollywood a) A suburb of Los Angeles, Calif., famous for the motion-picture industry established there. b) Hence, the American motion-picture industry.” An adjectival form is also recognized.

So there is Hollywood, the place, and “Hollywood,” a concept invaluable to international trade negotiators, film critics, and cultural historians in need of a short, generic term to contain both American filmmaking and American film. Of course, not all American films, even the important ones, have been made in Hollywood or by Hollywood-based personnel. But why should details like this spoil a perfectly good argument? No one but a local auto worker cares that not all “American” cars are made in Detroit. So what difference does it make if Paramount produces one film in Los Angeles, one on location in the Philippines, and a third in New York City? Doesn’t the industrial system eliminate any variation that might arise locally?

The problem is, unlike refrigerators or automobiles, motion pictures are unique cultural products. Each example, no matter how modest, reflects a certain degree of creative thinking in terms of concept, execution, and marketing. No matter how industrial “the Hollywood mode of production” might have become, the process was never fully mechanized and was always contaminated by a range of variables, including the taste and ability of key personnel. And the character of their contribution was itself affected by a further set of economic and cultural conditions, in which time and place played significant roles.

The first film historians, except those in the pay of the industry, generally hated the studio system and saw it as a monolith oppressing any attempt at innovation



or personal artistry. Many early filmmakers agreed. Even in nickelodeon days, D. W. Griffith referred to his regular output of two films per week as “grinding out another sausage.” More recent historians have become interested in the variations within studio product and not just the commonalities. Despite a high degree of industrialization, why did the American cinema fail to produce work of uniform quality, with some works clearly below average and others well above? Although the result may be obvious to anyone in the audience, the mechanism that allowed these variations was not clearly understood by early historians. We now have a better understanding of why filmmakers like John Ford and Alfred Hitchcock were able to make this system work for their benefit, while others, like Orson Welles and Erich von Stroheim, ran afoul of it.

Questions like these bring us back to the unfortunate identification of the entire American cinema with that portion of it produced in and around Hollywood, California. Is the American cinema really as homogenous as the “Hollywood” typology would suggest? Or is it possible for a particular film produced within the industry but well outside southern California to draw upon, and also reflect, *local* cultural traditions and technical expertise? Directors like Howard Hawks and John Ford were able to put a personal stamp on Hollywood product made at the height of the factory studio era. Could the special qualities of local film production leave similar fingerprints of their own? But not every movie director is a John Ford, and not every town with a studio and a film crew is a miniature Hollywood. Despite occasional heroic efforts, film production in San Francisco, Chicago, Miami, and many other locations never established a continuing tradition, and so never created an identifiable local style. Indeed, outside of Los Angeles, there has been only one spot in the United States where continuous production activity (from the late nineteenth century), a fertile cultural and economic climate, a professional workforce, and an adequate technological infrastructure have combined to create both an indigenous local film style and a viable local film industry. This is the area around New York (in fact, within commuting distance of Times Square), which stretches from the Edison laboratory and Fort Lee studios in northern New Jersey to the Thanhouser and D. W. Griffith studios in Westchester, and out beyond the Paramount Astoria studio and Brooklyn Vitaphone stages to the scattered rental facilities in eastern Queens and Long Island.

As a matter of convenience, I will usually refer to all of them as “New York” studios, even though many were outside the city and a significant number were located in New Jersey. If films made by Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer in Culver City could announce themselves as “Made in Hollywood, U.S.A.,” we can feel justified in employing a similar shorthand. The various state and local film commissions currently promoting production in New York and New Jersey may concentrate on the different advantages offered by each locality, but from our perspective (and that

of the various union locals) this is one large economic and cultural community, drawing much of its potential strength from this very diversity.

One organizational model employed in earlier film histories was the “spotlight theory,” where the focus of interest shifts over time from Italy to Germany to Russia to France (or some similar sequence). This format may make sense in terms of editorial organization but always slights the interrelationships of these national cinemas. Even worse, it slights one era of a nation’s production at the expense of another. Because of a fascination with Soviet filmmaking, pre-1917 Russian cinema was generally ignored; we know now that this was a serious mistake, not least because of what those earlier films tell us about the Soviet cinema that followed.

Early histories of American film followed a similar model. In one book after another, the industry starts in the East in the Edison laboratory and the studios of the nickelodeon-era producers. Then, as D. W. Griffith leaves Biograph and eventually makes *The Birth of a Nation* on the West Coast, the focus shifts there and never returns. Of course, the bulk of American production was already centralized in southern California by this time, and no one could argue that Hollywood ever lost its primacy. But neither did production entirely abandon New York. It often concentrated on other genres than the feature film, and total activity sometimes dropped dangerously low; but filmmaking continued to survive in the East, occasionally even trespassing on Hollywood’s turf when the situation allowed.

For example, during the thirteen-year stretch from 1968 to 1980, sixteen films produced in New York were nominated as best picture of the year by Hollywood’s Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. Six of these films were winners, a total far out of proportion to the small number of features actually being made in New York in those days. This era of *Midnight Cowboy*, *The Godfather*, *Annie Hall*, and *The French Connection* was hailed at the time as a triumph for runaway production, as if there had been no continuous filmmaking tradition in New York dating back to Griffith and Edison. The success of these films was seen as a run of good luck that arose more or less by chance and seemed to fade just as mysteriously. This is the equivalent of saying that the appearance of the French New Wave had nothing to do with continuing developments in the economic, cultural, and political sphere peculiar to France and the French film industry.

But France cannot provide a model for this study because, as in most film-producing nations, the film center there is located in the cultural capital. Only in the United States was a motion picture factory town established far away from the nation’s political, cultural, and economic center. The consequences of this separation of Hollywood from the rest of the country have been a concern of moralists, ethnographers, and cultural critics for many years; but our concern here is for the *films* that were produced in the East. Was the amount of production remaining there at all significant? Who was making the films and under what circumstances?

And was this product simply an indistinguishable extension of “Hollywood,” or did New York cinema actually have a style and substance of its own?

Historians of early Italian cinema make a clear distinction between studios located in Rome and others established in Turin. Soviet cinema is incomprehensible unless we recognize that Alexander Dovzhenko’s films were not made in Moscow but in Ukraine. The establishment of the “new German cinema” in Munich was as much a challenge to the existing German film industry as the Werner Herzog and Rainer Werner Fassbinder films that were made there. Recognizing the importance of such regional production is not the whole story in any of these cases, but the whole story can hardly be understood without acknowledging it.

I suspected that New York production played a somewhat similar role in the history of the American motion picture industry, a chapter that had been lost when press agents, social scientists, and even film historians chose to identify all American cinema with Hollywood. The literature devoted to East Coast film production occupied a very small shelf. Studies of early cinema dealt with the region almost by default, and the later period was documented only in local newspaper and magazine features. This lack of attention is usually a good indication that there is not much of a story to tell, and I expected to be able to get a handle on the history of film production in the East in relatively short order. That was in 1979, when I began interviewing retired union veterans for the Astoria Motion Picture and Television Center Foundation, a not-for-profit entity created to reopen the Paramount Astoria studio. But the more I learned, the more complicated this story became. Over the years I taught “The History of the New York Motion Picture Industry” to film students at Columbia University, the School of Visual Arts, New York University, and Rutgers University, and its shape seemed to change every time I went over it.

This book began as an effort to summarize that history in a single volume, a survey that might define New York production the way other historians have managed to treat the national cinemas of England or France. But the authors of those books did not have to convince their readers that an indigenous French cinema actually existed; they could organize the recognized highlights to foreground whichever aspect they chose to emphasize. A lot more would be required here, not only because the highlights generally remained unrecognized, but also because I had seriously underestimated the amount of production in New York over the past one hundred years.

Filmmaking in the United States began in the Edison laboratory at West Orange, New Jersey, but quickly relocated to New York, where not only Edison but also the rival Vitagraph and Biograph companies were all established by the turn of the century. Philadelphia and Chicago became production centers as well, but faded quickly after the decline of the nickelodeon. Traveling production units had arrived in southern California by 1907, around the same time that Fort Lee, New

Jersey, became a permanent production center in the East. Administrative and executive offices were located in New York, as they would be throughout the “classical” studio era, and a production might be assigned to a convenient site in or near New York or to the more distant, but cheaper to operate, California studios. As late as 1920, William Fox wrote to his West Coast production chief, Sol Wurtzel, that the bread-and-butter star vehicles would be made in California but that all “special productions” would be made in the East, where the top executives could personally supervise them.<sup>9</sup>

Economics soon dictated otherwise. The coal rationing imposed during the winter of 1918, followed by the severe 1920–1921 recession, made the operation of a separate set of studios in New York and New Jersey seem much less practical. This is the point at which film production in the East becomes, at best, a footnote in all histories of the American motion picture industry. But if the spotlight had turned elsewhere, no one seemed to have told the film workers back in New York. In 1926, England produced thirty-seven features, the Soviet Union sixteen, Italy maybe five. There were no feature films made in Canada that year.<sup>10</sup> By comparison, Paramount and First National alone made forty features in their New York studios in 1926, to which must be added the output of various independent producers working in rental stages. Quality was not a problem. Beginning in 1922, *Film Daily* surveyed the nation’s film critics to create an annual “ten best” list. In the first three years, nine of the thirty films cited were New York productions.<sup>11</sup> And even when feature production did fall off, a cushion provided by news films and documentaries, animated cartoons, sponsored and educational production, and both live and recorded television served to keep facilities running and technical skills intact.

The shape of early cinema in America has been well documented recently, and as far as current history goes, most filmgoers recognize the special characteristics of East Coast production in the era of Sidney Lumet and Woody Allen. What they do not understand is that these more recent films are not just reactions against “Hollywood” that happened to be made in New York but are instead part of a local production cycle dating back to the nickelodeon era. The problem has always been the black hole that exists in standard histories between the heyday of the Fort Lee studios and the “revival” of New York production in the years after World War II. If activity in New York throughout these decades really was as dead as those histories suggest, no surviving filmmaking tradition could possibly connect *On the Waterfront* (1954), *The Producers* (1968), and *Do the Right Thing* (1989) with films made two generations earlier.

So the period between the two world wars is where the argument for continuity of production in the East has to be made. The fact that films continued to be produced here is not all that difficult to demonstrate: trade papers, surviving copies of the films, and the memories of industry veterans can fill in most of these blanks. But



the simple process of assembling a filmography is already enough to suggest that we are not in Hollywood anymore. Genres like cartoons and race movies, marginalized or ignored in more general histories, take on a far more prominent role if our focus is the history of motion picture production in the East. The conventional definition of American film, which seldom goes much beyond the feature-length narrative, stretches out in interesting and unusual ways. Critical tools need to be adjusted accordingly, which is not necessarily a bad thing.

But can we demonstrate that these films are essentially any different from those being made elsewhere in the country? In fact, this is where a careful examination of the 1919–1941 period, when New York production seemed completely eclipsed by “the Metropolis of Make-Believe” on the West Coast, proves most useful. Once the bulk of production had shifted to California, no one would ever again make a film in New York without a special reason to do so. Hollywood really had become the default center of the American film industry, and if certain films of the Marx Brothers or Martin Scorsese were made in New York, this was no arbitrary decision. What is important to remember is that a decision to film in New York, rather than Toronto or Miami, almost never has to do with saving money but is a social or cultural choice. Some combination of talent and location trumps economic considerations, often over the well-taken objections of production accountants. Woody Allen joked that he made films in New York because he liked to sleep in his own bed at night. Charlie Chaplin and Buster Keaton probably liked to sleep in their own beds, too, but if they had said something similar about Hollywood, would anyone have found this funny?

For more than thirty years Woody Allen’s cinema was entirely bound up with the cultural construct called “New York.” His films were not just stories of New York and New Yorkers, but somehow channeled the emotional and intellectual energy of the place. The notion that he might have produced this same body of work in Hollywood or anywhere else the “Hollywood studio system” holds sway—that’s what’s funny. (Allen’s more recent productions would appear to verify this conclusion.) Allen’s films may be excessive examples, but they do demonstrate how regional peculiarities can make themselves felt within an apparently monolithic national cinema. Of course, the films of one man hardly constitute a significant local variation. But over the past hundred years, the local “body of work” has clearly demonstrated a set of characteristics all its own.

For most historians, “the Hollywood studio system” is easy to describe.<sup>12</sup> There is a factory site staffed by permanent employees producing and shipping completed motion picture films on a regular schedule. The factory is the manufacturing division of a vertically integrated enterprise that also operates its own distribution arm and retail outlets, called theaters. Various systems of industrial management are employed to control the operation of this business. In fact, manufacturing was the

only element ever centered in Hollywood; distribution and the operation of national theater chains were run out of New York. Even production was first organized in the East, where the operation of a “film factory” had been worked out in Vitagraph’s Flatbush studio as early as 1906. The rude open-air stages that began going up in and around Hollywood in the years before World War I, and the operating principles through which they were managed, were all first developed in New York.

By 1920 the economic and industrial situation described earlier seemed to have put an end to film production in the East. There appeared to be no financial justification for the existence of a small cadre of satellite studios generating a fraction of the parent company’s output. But production did come back. Paramount, in particular, created a miniature Hollywood in the East to supplement its West Coast product. Unfortunately, this idea was doomed from the start: scaled-down versions of Hollywood studios would never make economic sense in New York. From one point of view, **the history of New York filmmaking between the wars is a sorry tale of decay and decline, a continuing series of failures** in stark contrast to the great operational success in Hollywood.

But there is another angle to this story, in which a new model of industrial production gradually supplants the old notion of “back lot” filmmaking. New York was never going to be a studio town again, not in the Hollywood sense, at any rate. **Yet some people still wanted to make films there—not just local people, but also a handful of Hollywood exiles unable to accept mass production as the only legitimate vehicle for American cinema.** Just as the local studios were falling into decay, this group created a **new sort of film industry, based not on long-term contracts and seasonal release schedules but on the production and sale of individual titles.** The requirements of the theater chains, which drove all production in Hollywood, were now irrelevant. Producers no longer worried about keeping their stages fully occupied because everything they needed was now leased for the occasion from a growing cadre of middlemen.

The only problem with this achievement was that it all happened a generation before the Paramount decrees gave independent producers a fair shot at national distribution. No distribution meant no financing, and one after another the various independent production schemes generated in the East were snuffed out. Even on the West Coast, industry giants like Mary Pickford were discouraged from any attempt at independent production. “I have to worry so much about distribution now that my ability as an actress is impaired,” Pickford told the Federal Trade Commission in 1923. “Producers have so bottled up the best theaters that it is often impossible to get a showing of my pictures in them. I will retire from the business if the conditions become worse.”<sup>13</sup>

What was often impossible for Pickford was certainly no easier for the lesser lights trying to make their movies in New York. The films of Lee De Forest, Fred

Waller, Joseph Seiden, and Charley Bowers are footnotes in most general histories of American cinema, if that. Even the East Coast productions of well-known Hollywood exiles like Gloria Swanson, Ben Hecht, and D. W. Griffith are generally cited as failures, ill-advised attempts at circumventing “classical Hollywood” production methods. From Hollywood’s point of view, they probably were failures. And after Pearl Harbor, New York production really did seem to have gone down for the third time, with only newsreel and documentary filmmaking still viable. There were no more features being shot in Astoria, no more short musicals and comedies on the Brooklyn Vitaphone stages, no more race films, no more Yiddish pictures, and only one surviving cartoon studio, the low-profile Terrytoons operation in New Rochelle. Even the one promising development to come out of the 1930s, commercial television, was put aside until after the war.

Yet, somehow, this industry began to revive even before the troops got home. When ancient soundstages proved inadequate, filmmakers went out onto the streets, often taking advantage of portable equipment developed by military and documentary producers and unknown or unavailable in Hollywood.<sup>14</sup> *On the Waterfront*, which swept the Oscars in 1954, was hardly the first postwar feature shot in the East. But it was the first to show that the creative contributions of New York writers, actors, and directors no longer needed to be dependent on Hollywood’s increasingly irrelevant studio system. In particular, the cinematography Oscar awarded to Boris Kaufman and his camera crew, a group with no direct experience of Hollywood production practice, signaled industry acceptance of technical practices once derided as “newsreel” photography.

The subsequent success of the New York film industry, climaxing in the spectacular Oscar run that began in 1968, has many explanations. To some degree, it was made possible by the failure of the Hollywood model itself, which no longer seemed attractive either economically or artistically. But the collapse of the studio system in Hollywood did not necessarily set off a rise in production in New York. This activity might have gone anywhere, even overseas, and the strength of its revival in New York seems to have gone entirely unpredicted. Although various local boosters kept promoting the future of New York production throughout the 1920s and even into the 1930s, only a handful of visionaries were taking this same approach in the 1940s.<sup>15</sup>

This volume is dedicated to those men and women who not only kept local filmmaking traditions alive during several very lean decades but also found creative ways to adapt their expertise to the changed circumstances of the postwar motion picture world. The story of the success they achieved is the subject of another book, far longer than this one. What needs to be done first is to look closely at the period between the two world wars, when conventional wisdom tells us that filmmaking in New York shriveled up and died. Indeed, the old model did die, the brick-and-

## INTRODUCTION

mortar studio system that had grown up in Fort Lee and had swiftly been transplanted to Hollywood. But even before all those antique stages had crumbled away, the outlines of a new motion picture industry were in place, a post-classical model with far greater potential for artistic innovation and economic success. A generation later, it would even be the way they made movies in Hollywood.

For their first major film after abandoning California (*Way Down East*, 1920), D. W. Griffith and his cameraman, G. W. "Billy" Bitzer, were able to take advantage of a blizzard that struck their Mamaroneck studio. Most of the other exteriors were shot on location in Vermont.



# 1

## New York Pioneer

### Griffith at Mamaroneck

In 1919 D. W. Griffith announced that he was leaving Los Angeles to once again take up production in New York. Asked later how long he would be gone, the man who had put Hollywood on the map answered hopefully, “Forever.”<sup>1</sup>

During a five-year stay on the West Coast, Griffith had transformed the art and industry of the motion picture with a spectacular series of films: *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), *Intolerance* (1916), *Hearts of the World* (1918), and *Broken Blossoms* (1919). But Los Angeles, which had served as a convenient winter quarters for Griffith ever since he first visited there with the Biograph Company in 1910, was now a factory town. Southern California was littered with gigantic movie lots, and with more than 80 percent of American production concentrated in and around Hollywood, Griffith felt that many locations were already “filmed to death.” In the summer of 1919 he had plenty of support. Most of the studios that had abandoned the East only a few months earlier were already planning their return. Artificial lighting had cut the advantage of California sunshine, and both actors and executives were tired of the expensive commute.<sup>2</sup> As Griffith told the *New York Times*:

Here in the east are all the properties and backgrounds, interior or exterior, that we require for luxurious settings—New York is the metropolis and the home of wealth. Also it is the home of much of the best brains of the country. It stimulates imagination and rivalry with new ideas. It is the home of the best actors, the best artisans, the best and the newest in theatrical production. In



the future I can't see any other centre possible for the picture producer who seeks the best of everything to score artistic success.<sup>3</sup>

For Griffith, artistic success meant complete creative control in the hands of a single filmmaker. That was the way he had worked at Biograph in the nickelodeon era and the way he had tried to operate in Hollywood. But as the business matured, Griffith's own successes came back to haunt him. Films like *The Birth of a Nation* helped establish the motion picture as a major industry, but the simple business requirements of that industry meant that running times, release schedules, and (most important) production budgets had to be regularized.

Griffith abhorred this assembly-line system and thought he had left it behind when he began independent production five years earlier. By 1918, however, it had crept up on him once again.<sup>4</sup> One of his solutions was to join with Charlie Chaplin, Mary Pickford, and Douglas Fairbanks in the creation of United Artists Corporation, a direct response to the concentration of power in the hands of studio chiefs like Paramount's Adolph Zukor. But the atelier-style production system Griffith favored was essentially obsolete, and Hollywood had already become synonymous with the factory system that replaced it. Griffith responded by abandoning Hollywood and transferring his allegiance to a production center that could provide him with the creative and financial support he required, while still allowing him to operate as an independent.

In the fall of 1919 Griffith paid \$375,000 for the twenty-eight-acre estate of Florida railroad tycoon Henry Flagler. Located in Mamaroneck, New York, about an hour from Grand Central on the Boston & Westchester line, the Orienta Point property consisted of an entire peninsula jutting out into Long Island Sound—a piece of land known since the early nineteenth century as “Satan’s Toe.”<sup>5</sup> Griffith biographer Richard Schickel suggests that Mamaroneck represented the home that Griffith never had; in any case, it was hardly suited for use as a motion picture studio. Industrial-grade power lines had to be brought onto the property and roads widened to accommodate construction vehicles. The Flagler mansion itself was converted into offices and dressing rooms; the camera department moved into the basement, and the kitchen and dining room became a small interior stage area.<sup>6</sup> Servants’ quarters were transformed into a commissary, a small laboratory building went up, and a waterfront cottage was built as Griffith’s personal residence. Griffith ordered an open-air stage constructed adjacent to the rear of the main building, a rather primitive facility for the time and more suitable for California’s climate than the gusty neighborhood of Long Island Sound.

Years later the Mamaroneck Public Library conducted a series of interviews with local residents who remembered working for Griffith. The jitney bus that transported visitors from the train station was driven by a man named Webber, who, like

the rest of the locals, was glad to earn the five dollars a day Griffith was paying (the extras, most of whom came out from the city, earned seven dollars a day; fifteen-hour days might bring as much as fourteen dollars). Griffith was “a fantastic man,” Webber remembered. “A chain smoker, he’d borrow from anyone. Anytime I had Duke’s Mixture and there was nothing else he took it gladly. Every time he’d borrow a cigarette, he’d reimburse the donor with a carton.” When not chauffeuring extras, Webber would sometimes be sent down to the Claridge Hotel, Griffith’s Manhattan residence, to bring back hampers of liquor. “Mr. Griffith was a fantastic spender. He set no limit in getting what he wanted. Sometimes during a scene he would have five cameras working: one in the center, one on each side, and two suspended in the air.”<sup>7</sup> Although the neighborhood gentry did what they could to limit industrial upgrading of the Flagler property, Griffith’s presence was a boon to much of the local economy. Schickel estimates that Griffith put \$500,000 in improvements into Mamaroneck, bringing his total investment to nearly \$1 million.<sup>8</sup>

After setting all this in motion, Griffith left to shoot a couple of quick features in Florida, leaving everything in Mamaroneck in the hands of Lillian Gish. He had already assigned to Gish the task of directing one of her sister Dorothy’s program pictures, *Remodeling Her Husband* (1920). The company had begun this series of Dorothy Gish Artcraft releases on the West Coast, although the final five or six titles were made in the East. The best known today, *The Country Flapper* (produced in 1920 as *The Cynic Effect*, but not released until 1922), is a witty pastoral comedy, obviously related to Griffith’s earlier Lillian Gish vehicles *True Heart Susie* and *A Romance of Happy Valley* (both 1919), but played for laughs rather than sentiment. F. Richard Jones was listed as director for most of the East Coast Artcrafts, but Griffith’s touch is unmistakable. “Griffith spent more money on these comedies than he did on the films he was directing,” notes Eileen Bowser, “but he declined to have his name attached to the series.”<sup>9</sup>

While Griffith and most of his production unit filmed in Fort Lauderdale and the Bahamas, Gish struggled to direct her first (and only) film while supervising construction and studio operations at Mamaroneck. She wanted *Remodeling Her Husband* to be “an all-woman picture” and quickly brought in Dorothy Parker as title writer. But some crafts were still exclusively male, and cameraman George Hill, just returned from the war, proved unmanageable. “He had shell shock and was hysterical,” Gish remembered. “I had to keep him calm. Oh, it was terrible.”<sup>10</sup>

During the bitter November of 1919, Gish found it impossible to work at the still incomplete Mamaroneck studio. Even the small interior stage had inadequate heat, and she was forced to move operations to the old Thanhouser studio in New Rochelle, a few miles distant. Eventually, Griffith returned for postproduction work on his Florida films, *The Love Flower* and *The Idol Dancer* (both 1920), completing these films at the Thanhouser studio as well.<sup>11</sup> Produced to close out an old contract

with First National, these would be the last “small” films on Griffith’s agenda. From now on, the entire company would direct its energies to its first real project, an adaptation of Lottie Blair Parker’s theatrical warhorse, *Way Down East*.

As was his habit, Griffith began filming the most difficult (and expensive) scenes first. On the stage, *Way Down East* had delighted audiences for more than twenty years with a patently artificial blizzard, a storm into which unwed mother Anna Moore is ejected by her employer, the stern Squire Bartlett. Griffith understood that even though Anna’s situation might seem out of date to postwar audiences, a film adaptation allowed him to foreground the spectacle and make the storm the dramatic centerpiece. He would do this by spending many weeks on bitter New England locations throughout the early months of 1920, not only waiting for the right blizzard conditions, but also designing a spectacular ice floe rescue to be shot on Vermont’s frozen Connecticut and White Rivers.

Griffith’s working methods at White River Junction were observed by Charles R. Cummings, publisher of *The Vermonter*, and reported in a special “movie souvenir” issue. At the climax of the film, Lillian Gish has collapsed onto a floating block of ice, and Richard Barthelmess must leap from one floe to another in an attempt to rescue her before they are both swept over a waterfall. “Mr. Griffith was supreme,” wrote Cummings. “He gave many succinct directions, such as: ‘All ready, Miss Gish’ (he pronounced it Geish). ‘Now sleep.’ ‘Lift your hand a little’ (to avoid passing ice). ‘That’s good.’ ‘Raise up a little now—slowly—no—the other way.’ ‘That’s fine—that’s a corker.’ ‘That’ll be a darn good one,’ etc. Then perhaps to the camera men, when she had drifted very near: ‘Turn slowly—now—very slowly.’” Griffith was telling the cameramen to change their cranking speed so that the ice would appear to move more rapidly when the scene was run in theaters. While filming by the old canal locks, the company was heckled by “college students” from Dartmouth. “Shut up—I am directing this work!” Griffith roared. Then to Barthelmess, as he struggled up the bank with Gish, “Don’t pay any attention to those savages!”<sup>12</sup>

Cummings was impressed with the dedication of the cast and crew (especially second unit director Elmer Clifton), as well as the \$63,000 the Griffith company doled out for local services (“and their men were good spenders, too”). He was less happy about the preposterous fur coat Barthelmess wore out onto the ice—“which any country boy would have discarded on the instant”—and somewhat put off by the quaint image of New England life that Griffith’s public relations machine was already generating. “They’re just a leetle strong when they say ‘old time dances are still popular’ here. They have begun to be popular, we’ll say, since they got them on the screen.”<sup>13</sup> Like the great documentary filmmaker Robert Flaherty, Griffith was not averse to staging nearly forgotten folk rituals and passing off the results as authentic. “A simple story of plain people,” as the film’s subtitle puts it.

Back at the studio, Griffith employed all the production artifice available to him

in the East. Costumes for the film's early scenes (set in Boston) were designed by the couturier Lady Duff Gordon, known as Lucile, with furs from Otto Kahn. Charles O. Seesel, one of the first professional architects to work in motion pictures, was production designer. Even most of the storm scenes were shot at Orienta Point when a fortuitous blizzard finally blew in from the sound. The company worked throughout the night to capture the height of the storm by arc light, a remarkable effect for 1920. Ironically, the climactic scenes of the ice floe at the brink of the precipice were shot that summer in Farmington, Connecticut, using blocks of wooden ice fabricated by the studio prop department.<sup>14</sup>

*Way Down East* was a tremendous success when it opened in New York at the Forty-fourth Street Theatre on September 3, 1920. After *The Birth of a Nation*, it proved to be Griffith's biggest moneymaker, and the reviews were more than respectable. But Griffith could not absorb the severe overhead expenses at Mamaroneck and was never able to maximize returns from the protracted road-show releases he preferred. A few filmmakers in Hollywood, including King Vidor and Marshall Neilan, also maintained studios of their own, but they were more efficient directors who worked faster and cheaper. Over the next four years Griffith would release only six more films before abandoning Mamaroneck, and only two, *Orphans of the Storm* (1921) and *America* (1924), would take full advantage of the costly studio operation he had created.

*Orphans of the Storm* was certainly the most successful of these and easily the most sumptuous of Griffith's East Coast productions. As with *Way Down East*, he turned to a familiar theatrical melodrama and threw massive amounts of money at it, counting on cinematic spectacle to amplify the simple emotional appeal of the original work. This time he started with *The Two Orphans*, a tale of innocent sisters and their travails in revolutionary Paris, which had already been filmed on more than one occasion. Offering wonderful roles for both Lillian and Dorothy Gish, it also had the advantage of allowing Griffith to frame their personal story against the background of the Revolution itself—an event hardly referred to in the original.

Clearly, Griffith was reassembling the dramatic structure of *The Birth of a Nation*, substituting the French Revolution for the American Civil War. But the parallels could never be exact, and if *Orphans of the Storm* suffers from a lack of the dramatic intensity that powers his Civil War epic, the reasons are obvious. Although Griffith abhorred war in general, he applauded the ultimate end of the Civil War: the bringing together of a family that had split asunder. In this case, he not only despised the French Revolution, but specifically associated it with anarchy and bolshevism. In fact, *Orphans of the Storm* can be seen as the era's most spectacular example of red-scare cinema, a small group of films produced in the months following the Palmer raids that tried to address Interior Secretary Franklin K. Lane's call for the motion picture industry to support American ideals and condemn Bolshevik excess.<sup>15</sup>



Charles D. Kirk's vast reconstruction of revolutionary Paris for *Orphans of the Storm* (1921) quickly became a local tourist attraction. D. W. Griffith directs from the guillotine. Photofest.

But whatever dramatic conviction *Orphans of the Storm* may lack is more than compensated for by its brilliant production design. Griffith was now using Charles D. Kirk as his art director and would continue to do so throughout his stay in New York. Kirk created at Mamaroneck a magnificent fourteen-acre set of revolutionary Paris, so detailed and spectacular that it became a tourist attraction on its own. Leon Barsacq and Elliott Stein, in their history of motion picture art direction, call it "one of the great creations in US cinema of the early 20s."<sup>16</sup> Kirk rebuilt sections of Versailles, Notre Dame, the Bastille, and the royal palace of Louis XVI, and made cunning use of local landscapes and mansions.<sup>17</sup>

Griffith also turned to Broadway, calling on the Eaves Costume Company to supply hundreds of eighteenth-century French peasant outfits and military uniforms, as well as elaborately detailed costumes for the Parisian nobility. In California, Griffith had strained local resources in order to assemble enough sheets for the Klan; in New York he could call on the nation's premiere costumers, trained to the requirements of David Belasco. He also broadened his acting company, turning to the stage for actors like Joseph Schildkraut, Frank Puglia, and Louis Wolheim.



Schildkraut, an actor who had worked with Max Reinhardt and was making a tremendous hit that season in the Theatre Guild's production of *Lilliom*, proved a bit of a problem. His performance as the aristocratic Chevalier de Vaudrey consists of little more than a series of artful poses. (According to one source, Dorothy Gish complained that he was prettier than she was.)<sup>18</sup> In any case, he added little to the film, never worked for Griffith again, and in future years often ignored the role in his résumé.<sup>19</sup> Frank Puglia, on the other hand, was a great success in the part of Pierre, the crippled urchin who befriends the sisters. Griffith and Gish spotted the Sicilian actor playing this very role at the Italian-language Olympic Theatre on 14th Street and launched him on a film career that lasted until 1965.<sup>20</sup> In the small role of the executioner at the guillotine, Griffith cast Louis Wolheim, already establishing himself in New York's stage and screen community, and soon to create the title role in *The Hairy Ape* for Eugene O'Neill.

Compared with *Orphans of the Storm*, Griffith's final historical spectacle, *America*, proved remarkably colorless. The film was designed to help celebrate the 150th anniversary of the American Revolution—a topic that attracted other East Coast filmmakers as well—but it suffered from a weak script by novelist Robert W. Chambers. The first half, itself longer than the average movie of the day, contains a string of excellent historical re-creations, including Paul Revere's ride (staged mainly in the area around Mamaroneck), and the battles of Lexington, Concord, and Bunker Hill. But the second half grinds to a halt in upstate New York, where the villainous Captain Walter Butler (a scenery-chewing turn by Lionel Barrymore) conspires with his Indian allies to menace the film's nominal leads, Neil Hamilton and Carol Dempster.

If the writing and casting are *America's* major flaws, Charles Kirk's production



Neil Hamilton and Carol Dempster wait for Griffith to call "Action!" on the set of *America* (1924). This frame enlargement shows an assistant holding the slate for cameraman Hal Sintzenich. Museum of Modern Art/Film Stills Archive.



design again stands out as first rate. Sets, props, and costumes are impeccable. Griffith was at his best in directing the battle scenes, staged near the towns of Brewster and Somers in September 1923, where the National Guard erected a tent city to house the hundreds of extras. But as the February 21 New York premiere approached, the area had still not seen enough snow for the Valley Forge sequences. Finally, on the tenth, the necessary blizzard blew in. Griffith quickly shot the Battle of Princeton and spliced the scenes in just before opening night. He then continued shooting additional material for at least another week, adding and subtracting footage as the film played its initial engagements in New York and the other major first-run cities.<sup>21</sup>

Despite endorsement by the Daughters of the American Revolution, *America* failed to generate the profit Griffith and his studio required. His less ambitious Mamaroneck films would do no better. Historians have generally dismissed *Dream Street* (1921) as a ponderous fantasy, but the film has some interest for modern audiences because of the director's experimentation with the Kellum Talking Pictures process. For a special presentation at New York's Town Hall Griffith allowed a song to be interpolated into the film and appeared himself in a spoken introduction discussing "The Evolution of the Motion Picture," one of his favorite topics. As seen and heard in the fragment of this material preserved by the UCLA Film and Television Archives, Griffith's orotund delivery is highly evocative of his days on the barnstorming stage. Would Griffith have ever become involved with the Kellum process if he had remained in Hollywood? Probably not. Experimentation with talking films was very much an East Coast phenomenon in this period, the sort of new idea that had brought him back to New York in the first place. In any case, six years before *The Jazz Singer*, neither Griffith nor his audience had any idea what to make of a "talkie."

Another misstep was the overproduced thriller *One Exciting Night* (1922), which has almost nothing of Griffith in it, save an inordinate amount of blackface humor. Griffith historian Anthony Slide finds it "a bitter disappointment" and possibly "Griffith's poorest production."<sup>22</sup> But by now Griffith was losing his audience even with good films. *The White Rose* (1923) was an uncredited adaptation of *The Scarlet Letter* (with a hint of Thomas Hardy), filmed on location in the Louisiana bayou country, with interiors shot in Miami's Hialeah Studio.<sup>23</sup> Ivor Novello, appearing in his only American film, failed to register as the Dimmesdale-like minister, but Mae Marsh's performance in the lead is still remarkable.

Ironically, although Griffith had saddled himself with the Mamaroneck studio and its overhead, some of his most interesting films, including *The White Rose*, were made far away from it. Perhaps the finest example was *Isn't Life Wonderful*, a stark tale of the German postwar economic crisis, which he filmed in Europe in the summer of 1924 and which many critics have cited as a precursor of Italian neorealism.

Griffith shot on the streets of Berlin, Copenick, and Grunaw, blending his own acting company with local residents and finding the same rough poetry in these German locations that he had discovered in the American landscape for Biograph a dozen years earlier.

Universally acknowledged as the screen's greatest producer of spectacles, Griffith disappointed critics and audiences whenever he focused on the powerless and dispossessed. *Way Down East* scored points for its blizzard and ice floes, but *Dream Street*, *The White Rose*, and *Isn't Life Wonderful* gradually pared down these mechanical effects and forced audiences to confront the most basic issues of poverty and despair. Because these issues had otherwise disappeared from American cinema in the post-Progressive era, Griffith was dismissed as obsolete and out of touch. Some in the industry blamed this directly on his retreat from Hollywood and preference for independent production. A film like *Isn't Life Wonderful*, with its starving refugees battling over a load of potatoes, was hopelessly uncommercial. *Photoplay* magazine urged him to rejoin "the outside world," which he could do only by abandoning independent production, especially independent production in New York. "I am not suggesting that you acquire puttees, a swimming pool and a squad of Jap valets," editor James R Quirk elaborated. "Nor am I suggesting that you pal around with Elinor Glyn. Yet, if I had my way, I would imprison Cecil De Mille at Mamaroneck for a while, and I would loan you his Hollywood trappings, each and every one of them."<sup>24</sup>

Griffith had returned to Westchester to shoot some inserts and interiors for *Isn't Life Wonderful*, but even before his European trip he had secretly signed a contract to direct films for Adolph Zukor. The Mamaroneck experiment was over. In January 1925 the bulk of the property was sold to a real estate developer for \$485,000.<sup>25</sup> That April, the trade papers announced a great "Auction at the Mamaroneck Studios of D. W. Griffith." The featured items were props and wardrobe, especially costumes worn by the Gish sisters, Richard Barthelmess, Lionel Barrymore, and many others, not just from *Way Down East* and *America*, but from *The Birth of a Nation* and *Intolerance* as well.<sup>26</sup> New York's first great independent filmmaker was out of business.

The Famous Players-Lasky (Paramount) Astoria studio in the 1920s. Named to the National Register of Historic Places in 1978, the facility (now known as Kaufman Astoria Studios) continues to serve its original function as a center of local film and television production. Museum of the Moving Image.



## 2

# Paramount on Long Island

### Subway to the Studio

Griffith's return to New York may have received the most publicity, but as 1919 drew to a close, it seemed that the previous year's entire western migration was being thrown into reverse. Goldwyn and Metro were also coming back, while Paramount, Selznick, and Fox announced plans to expand their existing facilities. Just a year before, industry observers had felt certain that Metro would never return to its old studio on West 61st Street. But now the company declared that it had left only under the pressure of patriotism, "compelled to curtail [its] activities to aid the government's policy of restriction and economy to win the war."<sup>1</sup> For nearly all the major producers, New York was once again an obvious place to center at least part of their annual production.

In 1919 Paramount's East Coast operation found that it had survived wartime rationing, the influenza epidemic, and the bitterest winter in living memory. In the months after the armistice it occupied four laboratories and five different studios in New York and New Jersey, a sprawling and inefficient operation that Adolph Zukor determined to concentrate into a single, manageable plant. After a fire destroyed his original studio at 213 West 26th Street, Zukor had moved the Famous Players Film Company to Durland's Riding Academy at 128 West 56th Street, today the site of the City Center.<sup>2</sup> Since then, Famous Players and the Lasky Feature Play Company had merged, absorbed Paramount (their distributor), and taken over a string of studios on both coasts. Producing under the Famous Players-Lasky (FP-L) and Realart labels, Paramount executives certainly had no thought of abandoning eastern production, and even moved some companies east that were already well

established in Hollywood. "With the perfection of artificial lighting equipment," Jesse Lasky admitted, "Los Angeles' sunshine is no longer a necessity; indeed many of our pictures produced in Hollywood are made entirely inside the Lasky studio by artificial light."<sup>3</sup>

That summer Paramount had brought out Mary Miles Minter and her director, William Desmond Taylor, to film *Anne of Green Gables* in Dedham, Massachusetts, but torrential rains turned a six- or eight-week shoot into a three-month siege. "Exteriors which were absolutely essential couldn't be obtained," Taylor complained to the press, "and while I enjoy the East and have a happy time there when I can loaf, give me California if I am working."<sup>4</sup> Taylor never worked in New York again. He returned to California, where he was murdered in his home by an unknown assailant on February 1, 1922, triggering one of the worst scandals in Hollywood history.

But Paramount's major eastern project for 1919 was a Lionel Barrymore vehicle, *The Copperhead*. Under the direction of J. N. Naulty, general manager of the 56th Street studio, Robert M. Haas and Charles O. Seesel built the entire village of "Mintville, Illinois" on a plot of ground in Elmhurst, Queens. In the film, the town appears as it was in 1846, 1860–1862, and 1904, aging appropriately at each interval. The picture was said to be the most expensive yet made in the East, and considerable press was given to the "thousands" of extras and two hundred Grand Army of the Republic veterans employed in the production.<sup>5</sup> That season Seesel and Haas began offering at 56th Street a series of weekly classes on "elements of architectural drawing, reading of plans, the dressing of sets, the selection and meaning of Period furniture, etc.," intended to polish the skills of studio craftsmen.<sup>6</sup>

While Marguerite Clark occupied the 56th Street studio that winter with her final Paramount film, *Easy to Get*, Zukor and Lasky began renovating the abandoned Amsterdam Opera House on West 44th Street. "The New York Edison Company tore up 44th street for a block and laid the necessary cable that would allow production to start on *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*," the *Motion Picture News* reported.<sup>7</sup> *Jekyll and Hyde* drew heavily on Broadway talent, finally establishing John Barrymore as a major screen star (it was his thirteenth New York feature in seven years) and casting in supporting roles some of the season's current favorites, including Martha Mansfield, Nita Naldi, and Louis Wolheim. The elaborate London setting, created inside the old opera house by Haas, Seesel, and Clark Robinson, was another design triumph, but it became obvious that such cramped shooting spaces were inadequate. *Jekyll and Hyde* was shot on the upper stage of the house, a 50 × 100-foot studio with a 24-foot ceiling height. By February 1920 the remaining tenants had vacated the theater proper, and Zukor tore out the proscenium stage and boxes, creating an 82 × 137-foot stage with a 31-foot ceiling.<sup>8</sup> But Paramount, the largest motion picture producer in the country, still needed something more appropriate.

"Fort Lee was suggested at first," Adolph Zukor admitted, "but discarded at once as too far away—and besides, there is always the handicap of the ferry trip, and the



rather long ride afterwards. . . . Since the bad winter several seasons ago, when most of the Fort Lee studios had to be closed because of lack of coal, there have been many and bitter complaints from stars and studio employees—many of the former were often obliged to walk up the long slippery hill from the ferry—and many thousands of dollars worth of valuable time was lost.”<sup>9</sup>

Recent changes in New York’s infrastructure allowed Zukor to look east instead of west. In 1917 an elevated line of New York’s rapid transit system was extended through Long Island City into Astoria, Queens. (John Steinway, who operated his piano factory there, was a member of the transit commission). When the Queensboro Bridge opened in 1909, its eastern approaches were surrounded by vacant lots, but by the postwar era, the area was primed for rapid industrial and residential expansion. Cheap land, the easy commute from midtown, and the availability of plenty of nearby workers’ housing tipped the balance in favor of Astoria—or Long Island City, or even “Long Island,” as New Yorkers then called anything east of the bridge. “For the benefit of those living west of Jersey City,” *Photoplay Journal* confided, “Astoria was the garbage spot supreme of New York until Jesse Lasky or Adolph Zukor or somebody in the F.P.L. organization decided to build a studio there.”<sup>10</sup>

Zukor’s perspective was apparently that of an enlightened capitalist. “Now the workers who come on the public conveyances will be able to reach the studio in twenty minutes from Times Square by means of the new B.R.T. Subway which will run from Times Square to within four short blocks of the studio. There is also the Queensboro Subway and the Second Avenue elevated now operating. [By

Louis Wolheim and John Barrymore in *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1920), shot at the Amsterdam Opera House before the opening of Paramount’s great new studio in Astoria. Museum of Modern Art/Film Stills Archive.





bridge] the studio can be reached by automobile in fifteen minutes,” he beamed to a reporter from the house paper of the Queens Chamber of Commerce. “Social workers have long told us that the best workman, the most contented and therefore the most generally efficient is the one who lives near his work. He comes to work without the edge of his enthusiasm being dulled by a tiring trip—and he can often return to his home at noon.”<sup>11</sup>

Studio construction began in May 1919. Zukor had assembled the entire block bounded by Sixth and Seventh Avenues and Pierce and Graham Avenues, along with the block front on the north side of Pierce running from Fifth to Sixth Avenues, a total of 140,000 square feet of land.<sup>12</sup> (Today, Pierce is known as 35th Avenue, and Sixth Avenue is called 35th Street.) Cameraman George Folsey set up his equipment on a 50-foot tower erected just across the street and produced a stop-motion animated film record of the construction, exposing a few frames of film every day.<sup>13</sup> The smaller plot would be the new FP-L laboratory, the most sophisticated in the country. It would print and develop all Paramount films shot in the East and serve as a repair facility for Paramount’s national film exchange operations. The first floor housed a modern machine-developing system; on the second floor, a more conventional drum-and-tank arrangement could process between 750,000 and 1,000,000 feet of release print a week (replacing the operations of four other labs scattered around New York and New Jersey). Most impressively, the building was designed with climate controls to monitor temperature and humidity in each room.<sup>14</sup>

The studio building occupied most of the larger site, fronting on Pierce Avenue, with the balance of the lot kept available for the construction of exterior sets. It was designed by the Fleischmann Construction Company to accommodate twenty production units working simultaneously. The main stage was an enormous interior space measuring 120 × 218 feet, with a height of 50 feet, enclosed by three stories of shops, offices, and dressing rooms. The original plans called for this area to be covered by a great glass vault, “to provide natural daylight so as to make it possible to take scenes practically from sunrise to sunset without artificial light.”<sup>15</sup> Given the scale of the new studio, this was a completely impractical notion, and during construction the glass roof was eliminated, to be replaced by a revolutionary system of studio lighting first used a few months earlier during the renovation of the Amsterdam Opera House.

In conventional practice, all the lights on a motion picture stage were controlled by a single master switchboard. Some were installed overhead, and others were brought onto the set and connected by heavy electrical cables to wall outlets situated on the perimeter of the stage. The cameraman would shout or signal his requirements to the switchboard operator, an especially chaotic process when more than one company at a time was working. In addition, as lighting schemes became more complicated, the tangle of cables running across the floor became dangerous and inconvenient. In the new system, all power was carried on overhead runways

(which reduced the new studio's effective ceiling height to forty feet). Remote control boxes capable of operating half a dozen lines were lowered from the runways near the director and cameraman, clearing the floor of cables and allowing more production units to operate with less confusion.<sup>16</sup>

The basement of the building housed an additional stage of the same area, but with ceilings only twenty-five feet high. Carpentry shops and electrical generating equipment were all housed within the main studio structure, as were the prop and research departments, purchasing offices, and a photography studio capable of generating ten thousand  $8 \times 10$  glossies per day. A marble staircase led up from the front entrance to the executive suites of Adolph Zukor and Jesse Lasky. Dressing rooms ran the length of the studio on the third floor, those for women on the west side of the building, those for men on the east side; the wardrobe department (with room for ten thousand gowns) stretched between them along the north end of the building. "The suites provided for the stars, each consisting of a secretary's room, reception room, dressing room, bath and ample closet room have been decorated to suit their personal tastes. The dressing rooms are provided with modern equipment and, unlike most dressing rooms, are comfortable."<sup>17</sup> Reisenweber's managed the studio commissary, which was located in the basement and decorated in delft tile.

This building, now known as the Kaufman Astoria Studios, was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1978, the only motion picture studio in the country so honored. Although renovated and expanded over the years, the classical exterior retains much of its formal grandeur, and some of the interior spaces continue to serve their original functions. Tourists visiting outer-borough New York landmarks can still look up and see the ghosts of two corporate logos, the once-familiar circle of Zukor's prestigious Artcraft Pictures label and the mountain peak topped by a range of stars that even today can mean only Paramount.

The cost of the project, announced as \$2 million, had grown to \$2.5 million by the time the studio was ready to open in October 1920, almost six months behind schedule.<sup>18</sup> The delay caused production to back up in all of Zukor's East Coast studios; by July, three films were shooting simultaneously at the 56th and 44th Street studios, and stage space had to be rented at Biograph for Thomas Meighan's *The Frontier of the Stars*.<sup>19</sup>

There was no time for a formal opening. Arthur Victor Smith, the new general manager of FP-L's eastern studios, moved most of his own staff into the building by September 25, and George Fitzmaurice's *Paying the Piper* was announced as the first film to shoot on the main stage.<sup>20</sup> That month the trade press reported that the official opening would take place in early December, to coincide with the arrival of Sir James M. Barrie and the start of production on *Peter Pan*. By the end of November, nine features and an assortment of short "tabloid comedies" for Paramount's newsreel division had already been shot.<sup>21</sup>

The studio had gotten off to a wonderful start, but within weeks the entire

operation began to run off the rails. Zukor and Lasky had planned their Long Island studio in the boom economy of 1919, but by the time they opened it in late 1920, the entire country, and especially the motion picture industry, was entering a serious postwar economic depression. Instead of holding a formal opening, they laid off two hundred West Coast studio employees and announced that the Long Island studio would be “closed for renovations.”<sup>22</sup>

Jesse Lasky attempted to disguise the bad news by announcing a new organizational plan that would centralize all production activities under a single “stock company” working in Los Angeles. He blamed “weather conditions and location facilities” for the move, not the collapse in ticket sales. Lasky did take advantage of the production lull to install \$200,000 worth of new electrical equipment in the Long Island studio (mainly in the basement stages), add additional carpentry facilities, and throw out most of the old East Coast studio staff. Walter Wanger, who had only recently been appointed “general manager of production for all studios,” was shipped from New York to another of the company’s new studios outside London.<sup>23</sup> Victor H. Clark would be the new general manager of the studio, Robert M. Kane was appointed production manager, and there were new faces in most of the executive departments. The new regime also brought in an outside “efficiency expert” to help keep production costs in line, but as would often happen in the film business, strategies developed elsewhere were not always appropriate to film studio operations. According to one trade paper report, all employees were assigned color-coded badges, yellow for stage access, white for everyone else. But under the ghastly glow of the Cooper-Hewitt lamps, white and yellow were indistinguishable.<sup>24</sup>

Between February and June 1921 this group completed five more features, including an elaborate production of *Peter Ibbetson* with Wallace Reid and Elsie Ferguson that, according to the reviews, must have been one of the most ravishing works of the postwar cinema (Robert E. Sherwood compared it to *Broken Blossoms*). It was photographed by Arthur Miller and designed by Robert M. Haas, but the costumes, as was typical of eastern production in this period, were by a Fifth Avenue couturier, in this case, Henri Bendel. (Just before release, the title was changed to *Forever*, because Paramount felt that small-town theater owners “don’t want any of this Swedish stuff.”)<sup>25</sup> But when Reid returned to California in June, Paramount announced that all the companies then working in the East would be shipped to California and the Long Island studio would be closed.<sup>26</sup> Adolph Zukor may have felt a personal attachment to the New York studio, but hard times called for hard decisions. The studio needed to close “temporarily,” he wrote to Jesse Lasky, “because we have to practice economy in every way possible if we want to remain in business, as receipts in the theaters are falling and the outlook is not encouraging.”<sup>27</sup>

“This transfer is made in the interest of economy,” Lasky announced. “We shall take every advantage of the California sunshine now that the rainy season in Los Angeles is ended. . . . The Long Island studio will be opened again when the rainy

season makes it impractical to concentrate in Los Angeles. We do not believe in operating an enclosed studio, with its tremendous expense for electricity, at a time when we can work more economically in Hollywood.”<sup>28</sup> Lasky promised to send the crews back in the fall, but it would be a full year before Paramount resumed production in New York. The poet and journalist Benjamin De Casseres, who had been allowed the run of the lot for the previous seven months, suggested in a lengthy *New York Times* essay that the closing would be permanent and that the entire enterprise had been little more than a “Quixotic” experiment.<sup>29</sup> The following spring *Photoplay Journal* continued to express amazement that “the great [Astoria] plant, the finest thing of its kind in America—and that, in the field of motion pictures, means the world—still stands idle, a monument to the days of wild spending which followed the signing of the Armistice.”<sup>30</sup>

Paramount’s technical staff had survived the lean winter of 1918, but when the new studio in Astoria suddenly closed down in 1921, the crews scattered. Some were relocated to the West Coast, but the Hollywood crews, fearing for their own jobs, had little regard for the refugees from New York. The young George Folsey had recently been photographing Billie Burke in such films as *The Frisky Mrs. Johnson* (1920), and Paramount had agreed to continue him at its West Coast Realart facility. But when Folsey arrived at the studio, the other cameramen (whom he described as “a potato farmer” and “a fish peddler”) refused to talk to him and rejected the lighting innovations he brought with him. “What the hell’s the matter with everybody around here? Nobody will talk to me,” he complained to Bill Collins, the only man on the lot canny enough to pay attention to Folsey’s lighting demonstrations. “Well, I’ll tell you,” Collins answered. “When you came out from New York they didn’t like you because you were an eastern cameraman and they hoped you would fall on your face and go back there.” Folsey succeeded in Hollywood, despite the early antipathy of the West Coast crews. “That was the kind of people they were,” he recalled years later. “There was no rapport with me. I had to do everything myself.”<sup>31</sup>

The mothballing of the Paramount studio only nine months after its widely promoted opening was a terrible blow to those filmmakers who hoped to maintain a viable production center in the East. Despite an investment of nearly \$3 million, Paramount demonstrated that when the crunch came, it was the New York operation that would be sacrificed. “The Famous Players Studio in Long Island is done, gone and forgotten,” gloated one Hollywood trade paper. “They have started shipping lights to the West Coast, stripping the studio clean.”<sup>32</sup> From this point on, eastern filmmakers working in the feature picture business knew that their activities were considered expendable, that their jobs would always be vulnerable to the vagaries of film industry economics or the whims of major studio production heads. In the future, tacit recognition of this reduced status, and the outsider culture it created, would become a key element of the developing “New York style.”

**"A Modern Rip Van Winkle"**

Within a few weeks, an epidemic of studio closures spread beyond Astoria. By May 1922 *Camera!*'s East Coast correspondent announced that "New York is done gone and forgotten. . . . Fort Lee is like a deserted village and it used to be the big place once upon a time. The studios here are being remodeled for other lines of business. They couldn't exist, that's all."<sup>33</sup> But no sooner had this gloomy requiem been published than business began to pick up; the West Coast stages suddenly filled to capacity, and the lure of all that unused space in New York proved irresistible.<sup>34</sup> *Movie Weekly*, which had already written off the year-old Astoria studio as "a ghost of yesterday," was now calling it "a modern Rip Van Winkle."<sup>35</sup>

Director Joseph Henabery arrived with his production unit in June 1922 to begin work on Alice Brady's *Missing Millions*, and by August, Zukor had completely reversed himself.<sup>36</sup> By the time work stopped again five years later, the studio had produced a remarkable total of 103 feature films, approximately 40 percent of Paramount's entire output over this period.<sup>37</sup> During this extended period of stability the New York studio functioned as a true partner of the Hollywood operation: there was a constant stream of production both inside the studio and out on location; a fixed group of stars, directors, supporting players, and technicians was based in New York (although there was a certain amount of personnel swapping between the studios); and each studio had direct access to Paramount's vice president in charge of production, Jesse Lasky, who split his time between the East and West Coasts.

The fact that the studio was a suburban enterprise, most of whose employees commuted *out* of Manhattan every morning, was unusual enough to supply plenty of copy for the fan magazines. If the trip to Fort Lee had been noted for its scenic (and undependable) ferry crossings, this new place on "Long Island" was right off the subway line. "We had come to the studio from *Movie Weekly*, and were told by the casting department to report at nine on the set," one columnist wrote.

That meant setting our Big Ben to rise early, for it's quite a distance to the studios. A hasty cup of coffee, a buckling up of our suit-case, a dash to the subway, and on our merry way.

At Grand Central, waiting for the train marked "Astoria," the platform was swarming with figures in various stages of half-awakeness, lugging huge suit-cases.

The Astoria sub came thundering in, and there was a surge forward. It is not the least interesting part of the day, that short trip to the studios, for one couldn't help wondering how many potential Mary Pickfords and Tommy Meighans and Charlie Chaplins were there in that little coach.

"Washington Avenue!" and a forward surge, suit-cases bumping on all sides. . . .

The company takes the beaten path, a well-worn cut that leads across open fields to where the white walls of the studio—Mecca to many hopeful hearts—looms up large before us.

The inhabitants of this little Long Island town are the most blasé individuals in the world. . . . “There go the show-folks over to the stew-dio,” was the sole comment we heard. That from an unshaven truck driver loading his wagon at the back entrance of one of the little red-brick stores.

At the studio, the troupe holds at the office of the casting director, who hands out cards containing the name, length of time engaged and space for assignment to dressing rooms.

Mrs. Miller, “ma” to the studio, sits at the desk with her ledger recording the assignments.<sup>38</sup>

If the aura of rustic glamour was hardly a match for the excitement of Broadway, the impression these film activities made on local residents was stronger than the reporter realized. Thirteen-year-old Ethel Agnes Zimmermann, who was born and raised only a few blocks from the studio, was especially entranced by what she could see behind the fence that shielded the small back lot:

We kids used to go up there and look through the holes other kids had gouged in the fence’s wooden palings, and watch them make movies. Then I’d wait for the movie stars to come out. Word as to what days they’d be shooting behind that fence got around to every kid in the neighborhood. It was as if we had receiving sets in our heads. . . . The great and glamorous came to work in block-long cars, shiny with nickel. And we neighborhood kids stood there, stiff with excitement, and watched. I never saw Valentino. I would have remembered him if I had. But I did see Greta Nissen, Adolphe Menjou, Gilda Gray, and, to me, the most beautiful of all, Alice Brady. . . . Watching her, I decided to be not only a singer, but an actress too.<sup>39</sup>

A few years later, still living in Astoria but now using the stage name Ethel Merman, she would find herself on the other side of that same fence.

The West Coast still produced the most films, as well as those, like *The Ten Commandments* and *The Covered Wagon*, with the largest budgets. But New York’s proximity to the home office and the presence (especially from 1924) of strong executives like William Le Baron and Walter Wanger seemed to guarantee that it would no longer be ignored. Initially, work had continued under the supervision of Robert T. Kane, who had been appointed production manager as far back as February 1921.<sup>40</sup> An industrious producer who had once run the Robert Brunton Studios in Hollywood, Kane was also a war hero who had been awarded the Belgian Croix de Guerre. After the armistice he had spent some time studying film production



conditions in Europe, an experience that would dramatically shape his future career.<sup>41</sup>

Kane was able to maximize Astoria's production potential by instituting Lasky's stock company policy, a Hollywood-style regimen that did away with individual production units centered on directors like John Robertson and George Fitzmaurice. At a time when powerful creative figures like James Cruze and Cecil B. De Mille dominated Paramount's West Coast studios, Astoria housed such relatively colorless team players as Alfred Green, Henry Kolker, and George Melford. The stars they worked with, for the most part, were familiar East Coast favorites left over from the days of the 56th Street studio, second-tier attractions like Alice Brady, Dorothy Dalton, and Thomas Meighan.

Charged with bringing production up to the level of twenty features per year, Kane soon learned how to float films in and out of the studio with great efficiency. The stage areas in the building were very large, but there were only two of them, and the back lot was small by Hollywood standards. During the summer months Kane sent production units all over the East Coast for extended location shoots, minimizing the amount of time they would need back at the studio for inserts and interiors (even though the lab had rudimentary climate controls, there was no air-conditioning in the studio). *Java Head* shot for many weeks in Salem, Massachusetts; *Homeward Bound*, in New London, Connecticut; and *Pied Piper Malone*, in Georgetown, South Carolina. Long Island locations were great favorites, and Paramount crews were frequently seen in places like Sag Harbor, Huntington, Manhasset, Farmingdale, and Great Neck. Kane also expanded on the established tradition of filming in Florida during the winter months. *The Exciters* shot for five weeks in Miami, all the exteriors for *Fog Bound* were done around Palm Beach, and *The Confidence Man* filmed in Palatka, near St. Augustine. Crews were even sent out of the country to the Bahamas (*Sinners in Heaven*) and the Panama Canal Zone (*The Ne'er Do Well*).<sup>42</sup>

Kane understood that one of the advantages of an "enclosed" studio was the ability to work regardless of the weather, and he was not shy about reconstructing entire New York neighborhoods on his enormous main stage. For *The Outcast* (1922), a set 150 feet long represented an entire block of Washington Place west of Sixth Avenue, as well as a portion of the Sixth Avenue elevated line with Washington Square visible in the distance. Two years later an even larger set for *Salome of the Tenements* reconstructed the corner of Hester and Ludlow Streets, complete with a quarter mile of streetcar track.<sup>43</sup> For *His Children's Children* (1923), the art department re-created the Palm Room and the Fifth Avenue Room of Delmonico's, decorating the set with the restaurant's original tableware and furnishings purchased at auction—even the original chandelier!<sup>44</sup>

This passion for studio interiors may have reached its height with Rudolph Valentino's first production for Paramount in New York, *Monsieur Beaucaire* (1924).

Set in the eighteenth century, the story takes place in and around Versailles and an English country estate outside of Bath. Art director Wilfred Buckland built twenty-four sets, all of them inside the studio. There is not a drop of daylight in the film. A reporter for the *New York Times* visited the set and was very impressed with cameraman Harry Fischbeck's "new system of lighting, in which a preponderance of spotlights are used. He obtains his effects of highlights and shadows by employing spotlights as an artist uses a brush and colors on the canvas. The basic idea is to make each picture scene look like a painting, with the characters standing out in bold relief. With this new system of lighting black is rated at zero and white at 100, and never does the camera man go below twenty-five in light intensity, or above seventy-five"<sup>45</sup> The film is artfully lit when seen in a good print, but unlike *Orphans of the Storm*, it can justifiably be described as stuffy, even claustrophobic.

### East Coast Escape Valve

Even though Kane successfully established the technical capabilities of the New York studio, many of the early films produced under his tenure lacked the excitement and imagination of the best West Coast products. What saved the situation, and perhaps the studio itself, was the escape valve that New York offered for the anomie and repression in Hollywood. As production at the West Coast studio grew more centralized and impersonal, the Astoria studio began to fill up with disgruntled Paramount talent fleeing the intrusive and overbearing supervision of Jesse Lasky and (from 1923) B. P. Schulberg. The key members of this exodus were Allan Dwan, Gloria Swanson, and Rudolph Valentino, each of whom would have abandoned Paramount entirely but for the New York alternative provided by Astoria.

"They had put a fellow named B. P. Schulberg in charge and he'd elevated some relatives to producers," Dwan told Peter Bogdanovich many years later. "One of them kept coming down on my set and bothering me and I threw him off and told him not to come back. Anyway, I finally said, 'Look, let me work at the New York studio.'"<sup>46</sup> In fact, Dwan blamed Schulberg, and sometimes, as in a 1979 interview with Joe Adamson, he blamed Lasky himself. Mostly he blamed the Jews, or, as he put it, "Hebrews wanting to be boss."<sup>47</sup> Dwan directed his first picture in 1911, and since 1914 he had made many successful features for Adolph Zukor, with whom he had an excellent relationship. As Dwan remembered it, he went directly to Zukor and complained that "I can't work with kikes."<sup>48</sup> According to this version, it was Zukor who suggested that Dwan would be happier working in New York, where fellow Irishman Robert T. Kane was in charge.

Filmmakers of Dwan's generation, including D. W. Griffith, Sidney Olcott, and Herbert Brenon, had learned their trade at a time when production units were centered on individual directors, real *auteurs* who were responsible for coming up with

the stories, casting the films, shooting and editing them, and sometimes even attending to general studio operations. This was the system Griffith had tried to recreate at Mamaroneck. But as filmmaking changed from “a game” to “an industry,” this way of working became obsolete. Dwan’s real problem may have been not with Hollywood’s Jews, but with the supervision imposed by a new producer class that, in his experience, they represented.<sup>49</sup> Like Griffith, he hoped to find in New York the same degree of autonomy he had enjoyed while filming one-reel Westerns and melodramas a decade earlier.

There were also more practical reasons for Dwan to work in the East. “I wouldn’t work anyplace *but* New York,” he told Adamson. “I was in a position that gave me the right to say where I worked.”<sup>50</sup> Like many other artists, Dwan relished the creative atmosphere of New York, and he singled out the extensive support system provided by the Broadway stage: warehouses filled with sets and props, a wider range of acting talent, and theatrically trained lighting technicians who knew all there was to know about artificial light. Dwan had been trained as an electrical engineer, and for him, this expertise was Broadway’s greatest contribution to motion pictures.

Dwan’s first films at Astoria were shot by Hal Rosson, an East Coast cameraman who would later become one of the most important cinematographers at MGM. Perhaps their most remarkable film together was *Big Brother* (1923), the story of a criminal’s regeneration, which they shot on locations all over the city. Dwan and his crews filmed around Avenue A on the East Side and at the National Iron Works in Long Island City. Most spectacularly, they shot inside the old Manhattan Casino on 155th Street and Eighth Avenue, which Dwan used as the setting for a grand “gangster’s ball” peopled with 750 extras, most of them recruited from the city’s more prominent Irish gangs. Rosson was able to light this cavernous space by hauling great amounts of electrical equipment from the studio and lighting up parts of it while keeping other corners dramatically in shadow. Back at the studio, the art department reconstructed sets that could not be lit this way, including a massive church interior and the prison ward of Bellevue Hospital.<sup>51</sup>

Dwan made a dozen features at Astoria in the mid-1920s, including *The Glimpses of the Moon* (1923), a lavish adaptation of Edith Wharton’s novel that starred Bebe Daniels and Nita Naldi, and *Night Life of New York* (1925), a veritable travelogue of the city’s fashionable nightspots at the height of the Roaring Twenties. Now using George Webber as his cameraman, Dwan experimented here with a new high-speed film sent down from Rochester; he claimed it was so sensitive (and unstable) that it had to be used the same day it was manufactured. The stock allowed him to film patrons exiting clubs and theaters at night, sometimes with available light, and to work rapidly at such locations as the Commodore Hotel, which he shot during a single all-night session.<sup>52</sup>

With a direct line to Adolph Zukor, Dwan had the power to ignore most of the

studio's usual operating procedures and work with his own unit, a practical compromise between the old and new production methods. Instead of drawing whatever technical crew was available, he was able to call up his favorite people more or less at will. Six of his films were shot by Hal Rosson, for example, and three by George Webber. Dwan's assistant director throughout the period was Richard Rosson (later elevated to director), but the most successful member of his crew was a busboy he discovered in the studio commissary.

Joe Pasternak arrived from Hungary in 1921 and soon became obsessed with breaking into the movie industry. On a whim, he showed up at the Long Island studio and succeeded in talking himself into the only job available, washing dishes and mopping the commissary floor for twenty dollars a week. "Did I mind? The dining room was sacred ground to me. I swept it every day, feeling myself privileged. I knew which was Gloria Swanson's table and where the directors sat. . . . Contact with the movie great (or should I say, contact with their dishes) had only made me more movie-struck."<sup>53</sup> Pasternak worked his way up to waiter and bribed a more senior staff member into giving up the lucrative tables of the stars and directors. In his autobiography, he gleefully recalls his campaign to win the attentions of Swanson, Valentino, and finally Allan Dwan, whom he considered an impressive director but "a cantankerous customer for a waiter." Dwan eventually appointed Pasternak his third assistant director, a position he described as "chair man." His duty, of course, was to make sure that Dwan's director's chair was always in place whenever or wherever Dwan decided to sit down. By the summer of 1925, Pasternak had worked his way up to first assistant director, but was suddenly fired by

Allan Dwan, standing on the camera platform at right, filming a New York location for *Big Brother* (1923). Bison Archives.



the studio when he became involved with an actress in whom Adolph Zukor was already interested.<sup>54</sup> Pasternak left for Hollywood, where some years later his successful string of Deanna Durbin musicals was credited with saving Universal from bankruptcy.

### The Queen of Astoria

In her memoirs, Gloria Swanson hardly bothers to conceal her contempt for Hollywood production practice in 1922 and, especially, her ill regard for Jesse Lasky, whom she describes as manipulative and duplicitous. Swanson was Paramount's most important star in the early 1920s; her films were so popular that they were used to anchor Paramount's entire release schedule. Cecil B. De Mille had established her in a series of clotheshorse operas like *Don't Change Your Husband* (1919), but she felt that Lasky had run the model into the ground through endless repetition. Because Swanson and Lasky both understood that the studio could control her better in Hollywood, it seemed highly unlikely that management would ever voluntarily approve her transfer to the East. So, using emergency medical treatment as an excuse, Swanson simply fled the West Coast and presented herself for work at Astoria, a ploy she had arranged beforehand with Allan Dwan. The moment she hit New York, Swanson realized just how isolated she had been in Hollywood:

After California, New York was a wonderland—an endless array of things to see and places to go. A group of six or eight of us would convene at someone's apartment in black tie and evening dress for a drink, then go to the theater, and then dine late in a little restaurant with candlelight and music in Yorkville or the Village, or at "21," or at the Colony. If everyone was still lively after that, we would go on to Harlem to listen to jazz. . . . I experienced more art and culture in six months than I had seen in my whole life. Whenever the atmosphere of the arts got too rich, however, or too thin, four or five of us could always drive to Belmont to the races, or to the stadium to see Babe Ruth and the Yankees, or to Forest Hills to watch Bill Tilden play.<sup>55</sup>

Dwan was very much a part of Swanson's circle—they would make six films together in New York—but so were Condé Nast, Edward Steichen, James Hilton, and Mayor Jimmy Walker. Swanson loved the buzz of the city, and although she acquired a home in Bayside and later a country estate in Croton-on-Hudson, she always maintained a series of fashionable Manhattan apartments, first renting one from the actor Richard Bennett, then moving into a string of suites at the Gladstone Hotel, and finally knocking down walls and taking over the entire top floor of the Park Chambers Hotel at Sixth Avenue and 58th Street.<sup>56</sup>

At the time, most of New York's film community preferred a more suburban environment. Thomas Meighan, Norma Talmadge, Joseph Schenck, John Robertson, Henry King, and many others lived in Great Neck, for example, largely because a theatrical community was already there.<sup>57</sup> By the early 1920s, this group had become quite vocal about their disenchantment with Hollywood. Meighan, president of The Lambs, a professional theatrical club, told one reporter, "Physically, Los Angeles may be a great place for a production center for motion pictures. Mentally, it is terrible. I favor New York as a center, the only center, for production if an actor is to be kept at the height of his ability." Meighan praised the city's wide-ranging "developments of dramatic and literary art" and attacked Hollywood as a one-industry town "where everyone gets so fed up with the motion pictures that they cannot think of anything else. They lose their perspective. They absorb no new ideas—no new lines of thought."<sup>58</sup> Lillian Gish, who abandoned Hollywood for five years in the early 1920s, was more diplomatic. "New York is the cultural center of the country," she said. "Hollywood is a wonderful place to make a home and have a garden."<sup>59</sup> Swanson clearly felt the same way.

The first of the films Swanson made with Dwan, *Zaza* (1923), was an adaptation of one of French actress Gabrielle Réjane's great theatrical successes, with Swanson in the role of a flirtatious music hall star who honorably gives up her married lover. Swanson's costumes were designed by Norman Norell, and the entire main stage of the studio was transformed into a vast Parisian café chantant. Dwan found another interesting location, an 1828 grist mill and country store located on the W. W. Buhrman estate in nearby Douglaston (now Alley Pond Park), which he transformed into *Zaza*'s romantic country retreat.<sup>60</sup> By this time, Swanson fully understood the difference between East and West:

Every day we all drove across the Queensboro Bridge to the new studio in Astoria in the borough of Queens. It was certainly not another Hollywood. The place was full of free spirits, defectors, refugees, who were all trying to get away from Hollywood and its restrictions. There was a wonderful sense of revolution and innovation in the studio in Queens.<sup>61</sup>

Although *Zaza* was designed as a showpiece for this new era of New York production, the film's reception was entirely driven by response to Swanson's very exuberant performance. "She is a combination of Nazimova, Mae Murray, and Lenore Ulric—and makes a frantic effort to be temperamental. Such outbursts are wearing upon one's composure," carped the *Motion Picture Classic*, while *Photoplay* simply noted, "The star is at her best in the quieter moments."<sup>62</sup>

Swanson's use of Norman Norell (and later René Hubert) as her personal designer was unusual at the time. Most costumes at Paramount's Astoria studio were either designed by the resident costume director, H.M.K. Smith, or selected by



him from one of the city's "exclusive dressmaking establishments." "Because it is easier to get gowns quickly in the East than in the West," the studio maintained a stock of only five hundred gowns in 1924, as opposed to the thousands on hand at Paramount's West Coast studio. Most of this collection was recycled for use by supporting cast members after having been handed down by the stars for whom they were designed.<sup>63</sup> If nothing suitable was available in Manhattan, Smith might go off on extensive research trips to bring back appropriate costumes and props. For *Wages of Virtue* (1924), for example, he spent two months in Europe and Algiers.<sup>64</sup>

Swanson went immediately into another film with a Parisian setting, *The Humming Bird* (1924), under director Sidney Olcott. Set in Paris during World War I, it was notable mainly for the scenes of trench warfare filmed at North Beach (now the site of LaGuardia Airport), which at least one critic mistook for documentary stock footage.<sup>65</sup> A section of the Boulevard de Clichy was built in the studio, and Old Fort Schuyler doubled for the St. Lazare prison.<sup>66</sup> In her autobiography, Swanson remembered hoping that her role as the gamine in this film would help her land the lead in *Peter Pan*; when Lasky picked Betty Bronson, a virtual unknown, her disenchantment with Paramount was complete.<sup>67</sup>

Director Sidney Olcott visits Gloria Swanson and Edward Burns on the set of *The Humming Bird* (1924). This parody of a Hollywood star's bungalow was constructed on the main stage at Astoria. The sign below the giant cockroach reads, "My Little Grey Home in the East." Museum of the Moving Image.



Today, the best remembered of Swanson's New York films is certainly *Manhandled* (1924), a clever Cinderella story about a department store salesclerk who is swept up in New York's high society. Doing field research, Swanson spent a day behind the toiletries counter in Gimbel's, taking care to disguise herself as well as possible and having her chauffeur drop her off a full block from the store.<sup>68</sup> Because the film was to have an extended subway sequence and Swanson had never been on the subway, Dwan arranged for her to be packed onto the 42nd Street shuttle, where she rode back and forth between Grand Central and Times Square until thoroughly exhausted. Both the subway and the department store sequences were eventually shot at the studio, but Swanson (a fine physical comedienne trained on the Mack Sennett lot) was able to use these experiences to help flesh out the script in almost improvisational style. "She'd add and contribute a lot," Dwan remembered. "And we practically had no scripts—we used to manufacture things as we went."<sup>69</sup> Another example of Swanson's comedic touch in *Manhandled* is her remarkable imitation of Charlie Chaplin. It was just a party trick that she extemporized during shooting, but Dwan liked it and worked with her until they had the routine perfected. She would do it again for Billy Wilder in *Sunset Boulevard* (1950).

At the end of 1924 Swanson went to France to film another Réjane classic, the Napoleonic romance *Madame Sans-Gêne*. Although officially a production of the East Coast studio, the entire film was shot at Fontainebleau and other historic locations, with interiors built by Henri Menessier at the Joinville Studios outside of Paris. The film was directed by Léonce Perret, a Frenchman who had spent considerable time in Fort Lee (as had Menessier). The only New York member of the technical crew was the cameraman, George Webber. While in Paris, Swanson discovered the young costume designer René Hubert, who returned with her to the States and had a long career in Hollywood.<sup>70</sup> She also brought back a new husband, the Marquis de la Falaise de la Coudraye.

Things were different when Swanson returned to America with the marquis. There were ceremonial arrivals at both the East and the West Coast studios. Although Allan Dwan always remembered her as a hard worker addicted to practical jokes and contemptuous of studio routine, others recalled this period differently. "After her marriage," wrote assistant director Joe Pasternak,

Gloria became very conscious of her rights and privileges. She informed the crew that henceforth she no longer wished to be called "Gloria," or "Miss Swanson," as we had been doing. She was to be addressed as "the Marquise," or better, "Madame la Marquise." . . . People like the operating cameramen had a terrible time. They had been used to saying things like, "Hey, Gloria, would you move over just a bit to the left? That's it honey, stand right there." Now they had to change this to: "Would the Marquise be kind enough, please, to move slightly to the left?"<sup>71</sup>

The team's last film was a delightfully broad comedy called *Stage Struck* (1925), largely shot in and around New Martinsville, West Virginia. Swanson played a country girl with delusions of theatrical grandeur, and many scenes were taken on a riverboat docked along the Ohio. Back at the studio, Dwan filmed several of her dream sequences in the new two-color Technicolor process. Instead of painting his colors onto the sets, Dwan confounded the experts from Technicolor by projecting color onto unpainted walls, an effect he had seen in the theater. Of course, elaborate decor and costumes were still provided, most notably in a "Carmen" episode shot on the stage of the Academy of Music in Brooklyn. "This dream sequence is one of the supreme spectacles of the screen," the Paramount press book boasted, but it would be fifteen years before Technicolor was really established in the studios.<sup>72</sup>

Swanson was now earning \$7,000 a week, but she had already made up her mind to abandon Paramount at the end of her contract and begin producing her own films for United Artists. Just a few years earlier, Paramount had lost Pickford and Fairbanks to independent production, and management was not keen on losing Swanson as well. Lasky's offers went higher and higher, eventually reaching \$22,000 a week; but Swanson had convinced herself that if she was worth a million to Paramount, she must be worth at least that much to herself. Even if Swanson was not the first star to be offered a million-dollar salary, she was, as she reminds us in her autobiography, the first to refuse one.<sup>73</sup>

The studio's response to losing Swanson was to waste no more money on her films. She was quickly run through a pair of formulaic romances under the nominal guidance of Frank Tuttle and Richard Rosson. At least three directors are known to have worked on the last of these, *Fine Manners* (1926), and Swanson appears to have directed much of the film herself.<sup>74</sup> If she had accepted Paramount's million, Swanson would certainly have continued making films at Astoria, and production there would have continued to thrive. But when she walked off the set for the last time in June 1926, she was the only major star left in the building.

### Valentino and Rambova

Rudolph Valentino, the one other star of Swanson's caliber to work at Astoria during the silent period, had already come and gone. Like Swanson, he also felt that Lasky had been pushing him into a series of romantic potboilers that exploited his stardom and ran the risk of alienating his fans. In fact, Lasky had co-starred Valentino and Swanson in Elinor Glyn's *Beyond the Rocks* early in 1922, just the kind of material they were both eager to avoid. By the end of that year Swanson was on her way to Astoria, and Valentino was on strike, doing his best to rid himself of Paramount entirely. "I will not return to Hollywood at the present time," he told reporters in New York after unsuccessful negotiations with the home office. "I have

been dissatisfied with the photography, management, and direction—the handling of my films. They do not live up to my artistic ambitions.”<sup>75</sup>

Valentino’s artistic ambitions came largely from his new wife, the cosmetics heiress Winifred Shaughnessy Hudnut, then styling herself as Natacha Rambova. After months of protracted legal maneuvers, Valentino signed a new contract on July 18, 1923. He would earn \$7,500 a week (a tremendous jump from his previous \$1,250) and make two films for Paramount in New York. In a highly unusual clause, Rambova was given “artistic supervision” of these films.<sup>76</sup>

Rambova had credentials. She had been raised by her aunt, the famous New York interior designer Elsie de Wolfe, and trained as a dancer with Theodore Kosloff of the Imperial Russian Ballet. When Kosloff went to work for Cecil B. De Mille, Rambova began to design costumes for films like *The Woman God Forgot* (1917). She soon fell in with Alla Nazimova and designed costumes and sets for Nazimova’s remarkable *Camille* (1921), in which Valentino appeared as Armand. From that point on, Rambova embraced Valentino’s career as her latest design project.

Although they had settled with Paramount in July, Rambova’s elaborate preparations (and Paramount’s suspension of production in the fall of 1923) meant that the first Valentino film, *Monsieur Beaucaire*, did not begin shooting until February 1924.<sup>77</sup> “*Monsieur Beaucaire* will be the last word in correct costumings, settings, and drama if the incessant labors of many experts will make it so,” reported the trade press. “Nothing is being left undone to make the picture a perfect one in every respect.”<sup>78</sup> To accomplish this goal, the Valentinos brought in the very same crew that had just completed Swanson’s *The Humming Bird*: director Sidney Olcott, screenwriter Forrest Halsey, cameraman Harry Fischbeck, and even film editor Patricia Rooney. Rambova’s personal attention was directed mainly to the costumes and sets. During a preproduction stay in Paris, she had commissioned forty elaborate costumes from designer Georges Barbier, and more than three hundred more were prepared to her designs by the Eaves Costume Company. She hired C. B. De Mille’s great art director, Wilfred Buckland, to build the sets, and early production reports had him working with local designer Laurence W. Hitt; but Rambova grew so dissatisfied with their work that by the time the film was released, she credited herself with the art direction.<sup>79</sup> Frank Nelson, then chief of the construction crew on the main stage, remembered working all night on a set for *Beaucaire*, only to have Rambova arrive the next morning and scream, “Tear it down! I wouldn’t let my husband work in that!”<sup>80</sup> Olcott was left to look after the actors, an unusually distinguished group that also included Bebe Daniels, Lois Wilson, Lowell Sherman, and Doris Kenyon. It is unclear who made the decision to have the actors speak all their lines on the set in French, a curious production quirk recorded by Bebe Daniels.<sup>81</sup>

By the time *Beaucaire* was released, Valentino had almost completed his second Astoria film, *A Sainted Devil*. Director Olcott was replaced by Joseph Henabery, but

the rest of the unit remained intact (except for Wilfred Buckland, whose role was completely taken over by Laurence Hitt). The film was set in the Argentine pampas and allowed Valentino his first on-screen tango since *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* four years earlier. The fascination with arc-lit interiors was gone, and a lavish hacienda set took up the entire back lot. When more space was needed, fifty actors and thirty-five horses were sent to “a typical stretch of barren country” just outside Farmingdale, Long Island, to film scenes of life on the pampas.<sup>82</sup>

Production was completed rapidly and without incident, as the Valentinos were eager to start on a new contract with J. D. Williams and Ritz-Carlton Productions. Because Williams had a releasing deal with Paramount, the Valentinos assumed that their first film, a medieval Spanish epic called *The Hooded Falcon*, would be shot in Astoria. But when they returned from a European “research trip” that fall, Williams moved the company to the West Coast, where the *Hooded Falcon* project finally evaporated.<sup>83</sup> Valentino and Swanson were the only two Paramount stars important enough to anchor production at Astoria, and the loss of both was a serious blow that would materially weaken the position of the East Coast studio in the eventual showdown with Hollywood.

Perhaps the Astoria studio was too small a pond for this extraordinary pair. Although Swanson’s memoir describes a warm relationship in Hollywood (when she was a much bigger star than he), the two seem to have avoided each other entirely when Valentino and Rambova arrived in Astoria.<sup>84</sup> This would not have been easy, given the layout of the studio and the fact that *Monsieur Beaucaire* and *Manhandled* were in production simultaneously (as were *A Sainted Devil* and Swanson’s *Wages of Virtue* a few months later). Swanson could not have been very happy that Valentino had negotiated a better contract than hers, had taken over her entire *Humming Bird*

Everyone is still smiling as production of *Monsieur Beaucaire* begins at Astoria in 1924. In the front row: cameraman Harry Fischbeck, Rudolph Valentino, Natacha Rambova, director Sidney Olcott, and production head William Le Baron.





production team, and in 1924 was being treated by the press as a far hotter property. She also disliked Rambova and was certainly aware of her notorious behavior on the set. Was the unprecedented location filming of *Madame Sans-Gêne* an attempt by Swanson to show up Rambova's studio-bound production of *Monsieur Beaucaire*? Madame Valentino may have had more of an influence on her than Swanson realized or admitted: it was only after the Valentinos had gone that Swanson (now the Marquise de la Falaise de la Coudraye) really began acting like "the Queen of Astoria," and only after observing Rambova's attention to every artistic detail did she feel that she, too, might take charge of her own productions.

### Wanger's Return

In July 1924, with the second Valentino picture in the final weeks of shooting and Swanson planning a runaway production in Paris, Walter Wanger returned from Europe to take charge of the studio once again.<sup>85</sup> A Dartmouth graduate and World War I intelligence officer, Wanger had talked himself into a position as Jesse Lasky's assistant on the strength of some minor theatrical experience. For a few months in 1920–1921 he had worked as general manager of all production, but then Lasky fired him because "he had a diabolic knack of fanning the flames."<sup>86</sup> Wanger was sent to "cool off" at Paramount's studio in London; when he returned, Robert T. Kane was already gone and William Le Baron was supervising production.<sup>87</sup>

Le Baron was a playwright and *Collier's* magazine editor who had been working as a producer for William Randolph Hearst's Cosmopolitan studio. There he had been responsible for such hits as *Humoresque* (1920) and *When Knighthood Was in Flower* (1922), and he would oversee production at the Long Island studio under Wanger's general supervision. Louise Brooks, who worked in the New York, Hollywood, and Berlin studios during the 1920s, thought Le Baron "the most extraordinary man who was ever in pictures," a tall, handsome Irishman who could run the studio without ever badgering the artists on the set.<sup>88</sup>

While Le Baron dealt with the individual films, Wanger focused on the big picture. "At that time, films were considered a third-class operation," he remembered. "Bankers weren't interested. Neither were writers. You couldn't hire actors from the theater. They looked down on pictures. . . . How we changed taste, how we improved sets and clothes, how we finally got great designers interested, that's quite a story! I brought top people from Paris to be interior decorators and now we influence the whole bloody world!"<sup>89</sup> Because they had better access to Jesse Lasky, Wanger and Le Baron were a much more formidable team than Robert Kane's unit had been.

Under Kane, the studio had moved along in rather conventional fashion, its production schedule dominated by the Hollywood exiles Swanson and Dwan. Wanger



and Le Baron instituted a much more ambitious agenda, developing new talent, emphasizing light romantic comedies, and sending the cameras out into the New York streets far more frequently. Where Kane had tried to make his films look as much like Hollywood product as possible, Le Baron gave Astoria's lineup an urban edge that could be clearly identified with New York.

Perhaps the most radical notion promoted by the new Wanger regime was the Paramount Pictures School, Inc., the industry's first organized attempt to identify and develop an entire cadre of fresh acting talent. Jesse Lasky announced the scheme with great fanfare in the spring of 1925, declaring the school "the first step toward putting on a practical basis the motion picture industry's effort to augment its number of artists." Like the scientific management that had been applied to other aspects of filmmaking, the Paramount Pictures School would be the first step in replacing the "haphazard" and "ineffectual" development of stars that had plagued the industry since the days of Mary Pickford.<sup>90</sup> Managers of the thirty Paramount branch offices were invited to nominate potential candidates, who needed to be young, attractive, and able to pay the hefty \$500 tuition. Eventually sixteen students completed the 1925–1926 session, among them Charles "Buddy" Rogers, soon to star in *Wings* (1927), and Thelma Todd, a fine comedienne who would appear in many films with Laurel and Hardy, Wheeler and Woolsey, and the four Marx Brothers.

The students stayed at the Allerton Hotel for Men at 66th and Madison, and the Allerton Hotel for Women at 57th and Lexington (where they paid for their own room and board). Classes began at 9:30 each morning and included such subjects as fencing, gymnastics, dancing, and etiquette, as well as makeup and acting. Pupils were taught how to hold a kiss for three minutes and how to roll down a flight of stairs without injuring themselves. The main acting classes were taught by directors Tom Terriss and Sam Wood, and Wood made a showcase feature, *Fascinating Youth* (1926), to introduce the "Paramount Junior Stars" to their new public.

Paramount organized a national tour to roll out *Fascinating Youth* and hired John Murray Anderson, director of *The Greenwich Village Follies*, to stage a theatrical prologue for it in which most of the Junior Stars would appear. The show toured the country for three months beginning in May 1926, playing all the top Publix Theatres from New York and Boston to Dallas and Kansas City. *Fascinating Youth* was a modest success but failed to establish any of the students as hot properties; subsequent films starring the group were canceled, and Paramount eventually dropped the school as "impractical."<sup>91</sup>

Although the acting school failed to produce the desired pool of new talent, the studio's search for young writers and directors had much better results. Probably the most interesting discovery was Frank Tuttle, a Yale graduate who had been working as an assistant to Frank Crowinshield at *Vanity Fair*. Tuttle's only previous

brush with show business had been as a drama student of George Pierce Baker and as president of the Yale University Dramatic Association. In 1920 he was hired as a scriptwriter at Astoria and was working on titles with cameraman Fred Waller, who had already “built up a reputation for his special camera and trick work on *Deception*, *Peter Ibbetson*, *Footlights*, *The Golem*, and other photoplays.”<sup>92</sup> Together with a young actor named Glenn Hunter and the writer Townsend Martin, who had been one of F. Scott Fitzgerald’s cronies at Princeton, Waller and Tuttle formed a boutique production company called The Film Guild.<sup>93</sup>

Working in a variety of rented New York studios, The Film Guild produced five artistically ambitious low-budget features, some from original scripts, others adaptations of Percy Mackaye (*Puritan Passions*, 1923) and Fitzgerald (*Grit*, 1924). All of these films starred Hunter, a Richard Barthelmess type who would later enjoy great success on Broadway in George S. Kaufman and Marc Connelly’s satire *Merton of the Movies*. Remaining cast members were recruited from the lower-salaried echelons of New York’s stage and screen community, including the very young Mary Astor, Clara Bow, and Osgood Perkins (whose important stage career was just beginning). Tuttle directed, Waller turned the crank, and Martin usually supplied the scripts.

When The Film Guild folded in 1924, the entire core group moved right into the Astoria studio.<sup>94</sup> Tuttle was first put to work as a writer, and his success with *Man-handled* (which gave Swanson a breezy, Colleen Moore–style makeover) was noticed by William Le Baron. Bebe Daniels, long a featured player for Paramount, had just signed a starring contract, and Tuttle was assigned to direct.<sup>95</sup> After the first of these, *Dangerous Money* (1924), Martin was attached as screenwriter. The four films that Tuttle made with Bebe Daniels in Astoria were pitched to a much younger and more sophisticated audience than the average Swanson picture. Costumes were less upholstered and generally skimpier. Romantic situations were slightly more risqué and showed the influence of Ernst Lubitsch, especially in the case of *Miss Bluebeard* (1925).

Tuttle also tried to make his films more up-to-date by incorporating the latest stylistic flourishes. For *The Manicure Girl* (1925), he filmed some scenes with a hand-held, gyroscopically stabilized Moy Aerial Camera. Paramount promoted it as the same camera used on F. W. Murnau’s landmark film *The Last Laugh* (1924):

Frank Tuttle . . . used the camera to obtain some unusual effects of continuous movement. The scene is laid in a beauty parlor. Along one side of the establishment is a row of small rooms used for caring for women’s hair. Miss Daniels walks into the scene, followed by the cameraman, who holds the camera against his chest, enters one room after another, leaving towels and doing other things. There is no break in the action throughout the sequence. Due

to the gyroscope in the camera, the man operating it can walk rapidly and keep shifting the position of the camera without any resulting jolts in the picture.<sup>96</sup>

The effect sought would appear to have been very much like that of the modern Steadicam. Tuttle used the camera again on a Gloria Swanson film, *The Untamed Lady* (1926), but how closely he may have imitated Murnau is impossible to say, as neither film has survived.

In 1926 Tuttle had an opportunity to work at the West Coast studio when Paramount sent him out to direct the Eddie Cantor vehicle *Kid Boots*. "It was an eccentric community in the sense that it was devoted almost entirely to making movies," he wrote in his autobiography. "Back east, when you left the Astoria studio, you returned to anonymity in New York or its environs. Weekends you frequently saw no one connected with your vocation. . . . In Hollywood people talked shop almost exclusively." At first Tuttle saw Hollywood as "*nouveau riche*, garish, the tinsel town I had more or less expected to find," but on his next visit he decided that "if you made the effort you could find pretty much the kind of companionship you wanted to find." The low regard in which Hollywood society was held by most New York filmmakers, he later concluded, was largely the result of "ignorance and perhaps a touch of envy."<sup>97</sup> Some fellow Astoria veterans, among them George Cukor and Edward Dmytryk, would also come to embrace the West Coast lifestyle; others, including Griffith, Swanson, and Louise Brooks, never would.

Tuttle's surviving silent films are so fresh and inventive that one wonders how to explain his lackluster career in talkies, disrupted only by the singular success of *This Gun for Hire* (1942). Few historians have ever discussed his films, and he is not well remembered in the memoirs of his associates.<sup>98</sup> Bebe Daniels ignores him entirely in her autobiography, and even though he had already made twelve features by the time he directed her in *The Untamed Lady* (1926), Gloria Swanson dismisses him as an insecure and inexperienced "Ivy League type who always had the answer ready before the question was asked."<sup>99</sup> Tuttle may have assured his own oblivion when, as a reformed member of the Communist Party, he named names before the House Un-American Activities Committee, a gesture not likely to have endeared him to any political faction.

Quite possibly, Wanger felt comfortable in hiring a college boy like Frank Tuttle because, unlike most studio executives of the day, he had a degree himself. He also hired other promising young men with little significant directing experience, including Monta Bell (*The King on Main Street*), Gregory La Cava (*Womanhanded*), Lewis Milestone (*The New Klondike*), Mal St. Clair (*A Social Celebrity*), Erle Kenton (*The Palm Beach Girl*), and Eddie Sutherland, who directed his first feature at Astoria and who would later marry its most remarkable homegrown star, Louise Brooks.<sup>100</sup>

### Louise Brooks

Like many another New York movie starlet of the period, Louise Brooks was discovered at the Ziegfeld Follies. According to one source, it was either Wanger himself or Townsend Martin who saw in Brooks's specialty number something that Paramount might be able to use.<sup>101</sup> Many Follies headliners, including Will Rogers, W. C. Fields, and Eddie Cantor, would leave Ziegfeld for screen careers, but the local studios were absolutely fascinated with his chorus lines. Billie Dove, Ann Pennington, Nita Naldi, Olive Thomas, Mae Murray, Dorothy Mackaill, Lilyan Tashman, Marion Davies, and Justine Johnstone had all gone directly from the stage of the New Amsterdam Theatre to work in one or more of the New York motion picture studios. Justine Johnstone even married Walter Wanger, who became her manager.<sup>102</sup>

Producers and casting directors working out of these studios haunted the stage doors, searching for beautiful women. In the silent era, the ones they actually put into their films were more likely to be dancers or showgirls than aspiring actresses from the legitimate stage. Highly effective performances could be created in the cutting room, but the way a dancer moved across the screen was a talent that could not easily be faked.<sup>103</sup> Before working for Ziegfeld, Brooks had spent two years with Ruth St. Denis and Ted Shawn, watching every move made by her idol, Martha Graham. At Astoria, her screen test was directed by Allan Dwan on a standing set representing an old cellar. No acting was required:

I did a regular ballet right out of Denishawn in this cellar. I came in one side of the cellar door and I ran across and looked out a window on the side of the cellar, then I ran back. I don't know who invented the test, or what it was for . . . because I didn't want to be a movie actress. I wanted to be Martha Graham. . . . Everything I learned about acting, I learned from watching Martha Graham dance.<sup>104</sup>

Brooks made her first seven films in New York, six of them for Paramount at Astoria. At one point, Paramount announced that she would star in *Glorifying the American Girl*, but in fact the studio never chose to star Brooks in anything, instead using her as a foil for Adolphe Menjou, Ford Sterling, or W. C. Fields.<sup>105</sup> It made no difference. Critics soon picked up on the enigmatic Brooks, a born cinema performer who was able to underplay just about anything. "There is one actress who is destined to succeed Gloria Swanson some day in the hearts of movie fans," the *Exhibitors Trade Review* predicted in 1926. "And, to our way of thinking, that actress is Louise Brooks. Her work in *A Social Celebrity* was a revelation. This girl has charm, experience, looks, personality, and BRAINS."<sup>106</sup>

Paramount never really understood how to handle someone with all these qualities. Brains and looks, charm and experience, were all very well by themselves, but not jumbled together in the same package. Such a personality was difficult to cast, and even more difficult to sell. Not until she left Hollywood and was signed by G. W. Pabst as Frank Wedekind's Lulu in *Pandora's Box* (1929) did she find a role that could draw on all these qualities simultaneously. Of her surviving Astoria films, only Frank Tuttle's *Love 'em and Leave 'em* (1926), adapted by Townsend Martin from a George Abbott play, gives a hint of what might have been.

Brooks and Evelyn Brent play sisters, both shopgirls in a Manhattan department store. Brent is the diligent and responsible one, Brooks the guileless and amoral younger sister whose selfish behavior drives the story. *Love 'em and Leave 'em* is remarkably sophisticated in the way it resolves its dramatic crises and surprisingly modern in the way it characterizes these women. Even the role of the villain is nicely shaded, in the fine performance of Osgood Perkins, one of the old Film Guild group. Perhaps this was the Brooks film that caught G. W. Pabst's attention, and not Howard Hawks's more conventional *A Girl in Every Port* (1928), as legend has it. Tuttle and Brooks were both at their best here; but with production in the East winding down, Brooks was shipped to the West Coast to work in what she called "the factory."

Although she had been born and raised in the Midwest, Brooks was shocked by the provincial cultural climate in Hollywood. In a 1979 *New Yorker* interview she recalled her journey to the West Coast as an expulsion from Eden. In New York, she remembered,

there were writers and directors from Princeton and Yale. Motion pictures did not consume us. When work was finished, we dressed in evening clothes, dined at The Colony or "21," and went to the theater. The difference in Hollywood was that the studio was run by B. P. Schulberg, a coarse exploiter who propositioned every actress and policed every set. To love books was a big laugh. There was no theater, no opera, no concerts—just those god-damned movies.<sup>107</sup>

Regardless of the working conditions, Brooks's roles in Hollywood were probably no worse than those she had been given in New York. She had had little to do in Mal St. Clair's *The Show Off* (1926), a fine adaptation of George Kelly's Pulitzer Prize-nominated play, shot largely on location in Philadelphia. And *It's the Old Army Game* (1926) was purely a W. C. Fields vehicle, with Brooks in the thankless role of assistant to Fields in his pharmacist routine. Most of *It's the Old Army Game* was filmed during a month-long junket in Florida, largely in and around Ocala, a small inland town in the north central part of the state. The art department liked Ocala because the local architecture was highly generic, and the town could easily



Sketch of Louise Brooks by director Mal St. Clair, made during production of *The Show Off* (1926). Museum of the Moving Image.

pass for an average American community—something it also did in *Old Home Week* (1925) and *The American Venus* (1926).<sup>108</sup> Considering the amount of drinking done on the trip—Brooks remembered the unit being called back to New York when Le Baron noticed that the rushes were “all tilted”—the film somehow managed to establish the screen character that Fields would play for the rest of his life.<sup>109</sup> Fields built the story around a few of his favorite stage routines: trying to get a night’s sleep on the porch as a coconut clatters down the stairs, or holding a barbaric picnic on the front lawn of a grand estate (filmed at the E. T. Stotesbury mansion in Palm Beach).<sup>110</sup> Within a few months of their return to New York, Brooks had married the film’s director, Eddie Sutherland.

Fields’s next film, *So’s Your Old Man* (1926), had the benefit of a better script and an even better director, Gregory La Cava. The humor in this adaptation of an award-winning short story by Howard Emmett Rogers came largely from character and situation, not just from the set-piece theatrics of Fields’s vaudeville routines. Fields played a suburban householder living in a small New Jersey town. When his demonstration of an unbreakable automobile windshield goes awry, he contemplates suicide but is distracted by a chance meeting with a visiting European princess (a



wonderful performance from Alice Joyce). Fields did manage to jam in his golf routine, but what is most memorable about the film is its sharply satirical picture of small-town life, much closer to Sinclair Lewis than Mack Sennett.

### Griffith at Astoria

Much of the credit for Fields's transformation from vaudeville sketch artist to fully developed screen personality can be attributed to William Le Baron, whom Simon Louvish calls "his most important and influential fan."<sup>111</sup> But although he continued to produce Fields's films well into the 1930s, Le Baron cannot be credited with bringing the comedian to Astoria in the first place. In fact, Fields arrived as part of the package deal that Adolph Zukor had made with D. W. Griffith. Griffith knew before he left for Germany to film *Isn't Life Wonderful* that he would be moving from Mamaroneck to Astoria, but getting out of his obligations to United Artists proved more difficult than expected. He had acquired film rights to the hit stage play *Poppy*, along with the services of its star, comic juggler W. C. Fields. Paramount entered it on the Astoria production log as film number 297. Harry Fischbeck was assigned as photographer, and Griffith brought in Charles M. Kirk to design the sets. But Griffith's films, though not always profitable for him, had generated a strong income stream for United Artists, and his partners were loath to let him go. As part of his settlement, *Sally of the Sawdust*, as the new film was called, would be released not through Paramount but through United Artists.

Griffith made three films at Astoria, each marked by his increasing obsession with his then inamorata, another ex-Denishawn dancer named Carol Dempster. He had begun using Dempster in his films even before arriving in Mamaroneck, and she gradually came to replace the Gish sisters and Mae Marsh in his starring lineup. Her performance in *Isn't Life Wonderful* is, in fact, quite good, but Dempster's talents have received as little respect from historians as they did at the time from her co-workers. To Griffith's biographer Richard Schickel, Dempster was "a mildly attractive young woman" who moved well but photographed badly.<sup>112</sup> Louise Brooks described her as unfriendly and withdrawn.<sup>113</sup> Ed Flaherty, a longtime studio gaffer who observed everything and everyone from high up in the grid, remembered icily, "She had nothing."<sup>114</sup>

In *Sally of the Sawdust* (1925) Fields plays Professor Eustace McGargle, a vagabond con artist, and Dempster is the orphan child he has promised to care for. Trials and tribulations arise when the professor attempts to reunite her with her wealthy grandparents. Because Griffith insisted on emphasizing Dempster and her dancing, many of the bits that Fields had found most successful in the stage version were trimmed down or eliminated, a shift in emphasis that he found intolerable.<sup>115</sup> James Sibley Watson Jr., publisher of *The Dial*, visited the set and found himself

ignored by the director when he paid more attention to the cameraman than to Griffith's new star.

In those days the Paramount Studio in Astoria welcomed or at least tolerated visitors, and I managed to get myself invited. The only other visitor that morning was a Yankee priest just returned from a stint in South America. The first set we came upon was the inside of a circus tent, where the famous director D. W. Griffith was making close-ups of a little girl. During a pause, Griffith turned to greet us, engaging the priest in conversation, while I peered between and around them at the scenery, the lights, and the camera, the things I had come to see. The cameraman, Eddie Kronjager [Cronjager], was standing beside his hand-cranked camera, looking bored. I proceeded to bore him further with questions which, to my delight, he answered in some detail. When we took our leave, I tried to thank the great director for letting us visit his set, but he turned his back on me, evidently offended that I, a nonentity, had neglected him for his cameraman.<sup>116</sup>

The studio had only four projection rooms for screening rushes, which even under normal production conditions caused backups and delays. But Griffith's obsessions strained the system just that much more. "The standard joke around the studio was that you couldn't get into any projection room because D. W. Griffith was in there running film of Carol Dempster's legs," Louise Brooks remembered. "He was a big joke around the studio, which wasn't fair at all."<sup>117</sup>

Joke or not, *Sally of the Sawdust* made a considerable profit and was Griffith's most successful film since *Way Down East*.<sup>118</sup> Although the comedy is not as strong as it might be, and the romantic interest (provided by Alfred Lunt, moonlighting for Griffith during the run of *The Guardsman*) was completely flat, the personal relationship between Fields and Dempster actually worked well. Both Griffith and Fields had been on the road and hungry well into their adult years, and the film clearly works with this. For example, a scene in which Fields and Dempster are soaked to the skin and crawl into a bakery oven to dry out was said by Griffith to have been directly inspired by a similar event in his own early career.<sup>119</sup> Part of the strength of the scene comes from its being shot on location in a real bakery on Bell Avenue and 43rd Avenue in Bayside. In fact, Bayside doubles for the fictional town of Green Meadow for most of the picture, which was convenient for Fields, who was living there in a house on "Gentleman Jim" Corbett's estate.<sup>120</sup>

The success of *Sally of the Sawdust* resulted in Griffith, Fields, and Dempster teaming again for *That "Royle" Girl* (1926), a gangster melodrama filmed largely in Chicago. To add some spectacle, a massive cyclone sequence was filmed at a ballpark near the Astoria studio and (for close shots of Fields taking refuge in a peddler's wagon) on the main stage.

Prop men collected gobs of dusty leaves all over Long Island, mixed with plenty of dirt. A wind machine was set up at one end of the studio. After Mr. Fields had climbed into the wagon, the wind machine was started and the prop men threw the leaves and dust into the air. Everything movable in that part of the studio began to move. Men working in offices on the third floor at the other end of the building began to sneeze. Persons on adjoining sets rushed out for air. . . . For four days thereafter, studio porters with mops and vacuum cleaners removed dust from furniture, furnishings, and offices throughout the building.<sup>121</sup>

The cyclone, said to have added \$200,000 to the cost of the picture, seems only to have succeeded in inflating the film's budget and length. On release, *That "Royle" Girl* was slightly longer than Erich von Stroheim's *Greed* and at least as much of a box-office flop. Paramount then urged Griffith to film a discarded Cecil B. De Mille project, Marie Corelli's Victorian novel *The Sorrows of Satan*. Adolphe Menjou seemed perfectly cast as Satan, and Ricardo Cortez, whom Paramount was trying to promote as a new Valentino, played a writer whom Satan tries to corrupt. Carol Dempster, of course, was the ingénue lead. Menjou, a highly professional performer who had made ten films the year before, was at a loss to understand Griffith's rehearsal methods:

There were no scripts for the actors. We met every morning in a hall above Keen's Chop House, where Mr. Griffith would explain what we were to do, and then we would rehearse. Interminable hours were spent rehearsing and changing very dull and uninteresting scenes. In the afternoons we went to the studio and shot and reshot. I suspected very quickly that we had a "turkey."<sup>122</sup>

Such methods may not have worked for Menjou, but they did develop a certain warmth between Dempster and Cortez, especially in their scenes of garret poverty (something else Griffith seems to have taken from his own experience). Elsewhere on the set, considerable time and money were spent on apocalyptic fantasy sequences set in Heaven, with choirs of angels flying back and forth on piano wire. Despite the best efforts of special effects man Fred Waller, these scenes apparently pleased no one, and much of the action was restaged, behind Griffith's back, by theatrical designer Norman Bel Geddes.<sup>123</sup> Griffith then restaged the action once more, cutting together different versions of the picture throughout the summer of 1926. The resulting film has many interesting moments, but little dramatic tension or unity. Griffith blamed studio meddling for the disaster, but the trade press, usually supportive of the master, seemed to take Paramount's side. When it was revealed that Griffith and Paramount had split, *Exhibitors Daily Review* blamed *The Sorrows of Satan*: "There were clashes during its production. It far exceeded its estimated cost

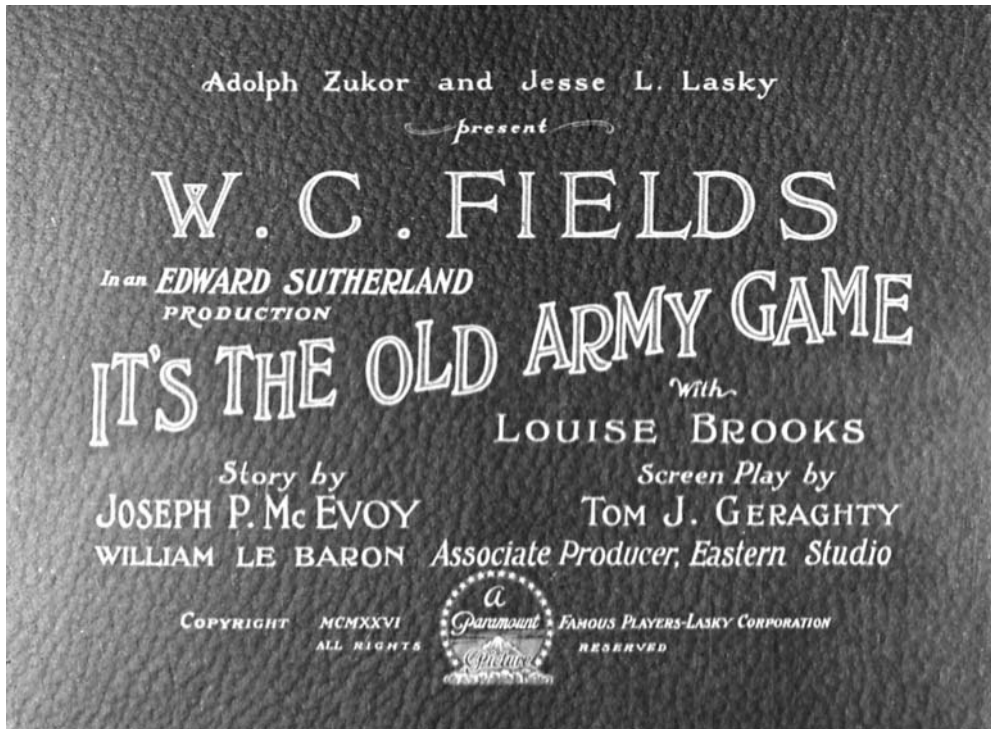
and the large sets used tied up the Paramount studios to such an extent, it is said, that other productions were handicapped to a marked degree."<sup>124</sup>

### Herbert Brenon

It might be argued that an old-fashioned and inflexible director like Griffith could no longer survive in a film world dominated by much younger men. Yet, at the same time that Griffith's Long Island films were coming apart, Herbert Brenon's career was flourishing on the next set. Brenon, who had been working at Paramount's Hollywood studio, had arrived at Astoria in March 1924, just as Robert M. Kane was on the way out.<sup>125</sup> Brenon was at least as inflexible as Griffith, an Irish curmudgeon who was prone to giving interviews denouncing studio interference and upholding the status of artists like himself. But unlike Griffith, he knew how to play the studio game, and before Astoria closed down three years later he was able to make ten features there, including much of his finest work.<sup>126</sup>

Today, it is impossible to see most of these films. There are no available prints of *The Side Show of Life* (1924), in which Ernest Torrence plays a French circus clown unable to resume his career after surviving World War I, or *The Great Gatsby* (1926), the only one of three versions of Fitzgerald's novel actually filmed on the North Shore of Long Island, or *God Gave Me Twenty Cents* (1926), a curiously titled film that was good enough to open the Paramount Theatre on Times Square.<sup>127</sup> Other Brenon films, like the brilliant, Ibsenesque *Dancing Mothers* (1926), with Alice Joyce and Clara Bow, exist only in cut-down versions prepared for the home-movie market.

Brenon directed Louise Brooks in her first film, *The Street of Forgotten Men* (1925), the peculiar story of a Bowery "cripple factory" that outfits an entire corps of beggars with unneeded crutches and false prostheses. Brenon's skill with the actors impressed her; but when she saw a sandbag crash to the stage a few feet from where the director was standing, she suspected that relations with the Astoria crew might not be quite as good.<sup>128</sup> Like Griffith and Dwan, Brenon was used to operating with a familiar group of technicians, and he paid special attention to the quality of his cinematography. James Wong Howe shot many of his most important early films for Brenon, notably *The Side Show of Life* and *Peter Pan* (1924), which was supposed to have been made at the Astoria studio but was switched to the West Coast at the last moment. For *The Song and Dance Man* (1926), based on the George M. Cohan play, they traced the rise of a theatrical star by using a series of increasingly elaborate theaters as settings. A Pennsylvania mining town honky-tonk was built inside the studio for the early sequences, and scenes of the hero moving up to a St. Louis vaudeville house were filmed at Loew's American Theatre on Eighth Avenue. Finally, for the climax on Broadway, shot on the stage of the Apollo Theater



The rivalry between Paramount's East and West Coast studios was explicit on each film's main title card, as seen here with *It's the Old Army Game* (1926). Frame enlargement.

on 42nd Street, Brenon incorporated the entire chorus of *George White's Scandals*, as well as the show's signature "Fan Number."<sup>129</sup>

As a follow-up to *Peter Pan*, Brenon did film at Astoria an adaptation of Sir James M. Barrie's *A Kiss for Cinderella* (1926), a sophisticated fantasy that historian William K. Everson has compared with Jean Cocteau's *La Belle et la Bête*: "Eminently superior to *Peter Pan* . . . it had a sophistication and an underlying sadness that meant that the more it was understood, the less popular it was likely to be."<sup>130</sup> Despite extraordinary special effects (the work of department head Fred Waller), Barrie's deconstruction of the Cinderella myth—with an unhappy ending—was indeed quite unpopular with audiences, who in the 1920s much preferred films like Brenon's highly successful *Beau Geste* (1926).<sup>131</sup>

Jesse Lasky had set up William Le Baron in the East as a counter to B. P. Schulberg in the West, intending to invigorate Paramount production with a spirit of friendly competition; what he created instead was a destructive rivalry between the two studios, largely characterized by "silly jealousy and intrigue."<sup>132</sup> *Beau Geste* had been purchased directly by Lasky at the recommendation of Walter Wanger, bypassing both the East and West Coast studio production heads. Because it is set largely in the desert, the film would obviously have to be made in California. But



B. P. Schulberg, head of production on the West Coast, rebelled against the project being forced upon him and refused to accept it. Lasky turned to William Le Baron, who was more than happy to send one of his New York crews to film Paramount's biggest production of the year right in B. P. Schulberg's back yard. As Lasky recalled, "The eastern personnel was sent west, and Schulberg was obliged to furnish studio accommodations for the interlopers and to watch the picture being shot in his own bailiwick under the Astoria banner by Herbert Brenon, now assigned to the eastern company, and supervised by Julian Johnson, who had been until then our eastern story editor."<sup>133</sup>

Brenon brought along an East Coast cameraman, an East Coast art director, and a raft of East Coast stars, including Neil Hamilton, Alice Joyce, and William Powell. The main title of the film carried the credit, "William Le Baron, Assoc. Producer, Eastern Studio." This was more than Schulberg could bear, and he called up his strongest arguments to persuade Lasky to stop dividing his resources and shut down the operation in New York. Lasky was by now fed up with the constant bickering between Schulberg and Le Baron, and threw in the towel. Sometimes he would blame the weather for this decision, sometimes excessive studio overhead. But ultimately, as he admitted in his autobiography, internal politics was to blame: "I had hoped that forcing the two studios to co-operate on the same picture might ease the situation, but it worsened it, if anything. The only solution seemed to be to concentrate all production in Hollywood."<sup>134</sup>

Soon after the August 1926 opening of *Beau Geste*, rumors began to circulate that Paramount was planning to shut down production in the East.<sup>135</sup> In September, Paramount sought to defuse them by renewing Le Baron's contract for a five-year term and praising "the record number of successes turned out at the Long Island studio in the last several months."<sup>136</sup> But the handwriting was already on the wall, and Le Baron would be gone by spring. On April 28, 1927, the *Exhibitors Daily Review* reported that "Gregory La Cava, having completed direction of W. C. Fields's last picture, *Running Wild*, will depart for Hollywood today, the last of the Paramount contingent to leave the Astoria studio."<sup>137</sup>

The loser in this battle, William Le Baron, took most of his staff with him to Joseph P. Kennedy's studio, Film Booking Offices of America (soon to become RKO). Ralph Block, then editor-in-chief in New York, went to work for B. P. Schulberg. Walter Wanger remained attached to Jesse Lasky. The top creative talent based in New York—Frank Tuttle, Mal St. Clair, W. C. Fields, Louise Brooks, Harry Fischbeck—immediately transferred to the Hollywood studio. Art director Laurence W. Hitt was even put in as head of the department in Hollywood, above the resident art director, Hans Dreier.<sup>138</sup> But for most of the studio workers in New York, the move was a disaster.



Films like *Yolanda* (1924), produced by William Randolph Hearst's Cosmopolitan Productions, employed dozens of painters, carpenters, and electricians later organized under the jurisdiction of Local 52. Museum of the Moving Image.



# 3

## Freelance Filmmaking

### Organized Labor

As soon as stories about the closing of Paramount's Astoria studio began to circulate, notices were prominently posted around the building telling the workers not even to think of relocating to the Hollywood studio: any jobs there were already taken.<sup>1</sup> Those notices, of course, were not directed at the stars, directors, or top studio executives then established in the East. The warning was intended for the studio's hundreds of painters, carpenters, and electricians, the uncredited technical crews that had grown up with the industry since nickelodeon days. But with few other options, not many were inclined to sit back and wait for something else to come along. "Nearly every man without family attachments has made—or is making—his way to the Coast in the best way his finances permit—stewards, deckhands, and waiters on boats being recognized as orthodox methods," reported the *Exhibitors Daily Review*.<sup>2</sup>

The apparent job stability once enjoyed in Astoria had not, for the most part, spread to the bulk of New York's motion picture craft workers. These daily or hourly workers had long since grown accustomed to moving from one job to another according to the fluctuations of the local job market. When work could be obtained, hours were long and pay was poor for all but a few top technicians. Because of the unique relationship between New York's film and theater communities, the first attempts to organize motion picture workers had followed similar efforts on Broadway. During the 1910s, West 46th Street had been known as "Types Street," where both amateurs and professionals milled about, hoping to be selected as extras

by anxious casting directors. In 1916 the White Rats Actors' Union of America began organizing these workers as the Motion Picture Extra Players Association.<sup>3</sup> With the collapse of the White Rats in 1919, the Actors' Equity Association gained authority over screen actors through the Moving Picture Players. Their initial demand, announced at a September 8 organizational meeting attended by seven hundred members, was for a flat weekly wage of \$7.50.<sup>4</sup> During the 1920s, actors and technicians hoping for work would often gather at "The Beach," a strip of sidewalk underneath a fire escape outside the Criterion Theatre. Producers might pick up entire crews this way, especially those smaller independents who operated day-to-day. (Later, The Beach moved from Broadway and 44th Street to Seventh Avenue, between 48th and 49th.)<sup>5</sup>

Despite the dominance of the great vertically integrated film corporations, independent producers had no trouble recruiting any number of experienced craft workers. And with labor already organized for such ad hoc production, enterprising suppliers made sure that props, electrical equipment, costumes, cameras, and everything else required by hopeful filmmakers were also available by the day or the week—including, of course, studio space itself. Director Allan Dwan found "dozens" of studios like this in New York:

You'd fall all over them. . . . Somebody left a piece of scenery in it, so it's a studio. No lights, so you go to an electrical company . . . and you rent 'em. Everything's rental. The last day you're in the studio and they're paying people off. That evening, about five o'clock, the place is empty. There's nothing there, not a chair to sit down on. Even your office chair is gone. It's all been rented.<sup>6</sup>

The most highly skilled workers, such as cameramen and directors, were unlikely to be found at The Beach and had already organized themselves into a series of guildlike professional associations. Phil Rosen, Frank Kugler, and Lew Physioc, three Edison cameramen, had formed the Cinema Camera Club in 1913. "We had no thought of a union, or of using the organization to obtain higher pay," Physioc remembered. "Our original purpose was to get cameramen to exchange ideas, and thus encourage manufacturers to make better equipment, especially lighting equipment."<sup>7</sup> By 1915 their roster had grown to 120, but membership suffered with the collapse of production in the East three years later. Rosen moved to Hollywood to photograph *The Miracle Man* (1919) and merged the remnants of the club with a similar West Coast organization, creating the American Society of Cinematographers. When production in New York revived after World War I, local cameramen formed a new group, the Motion Picture Photographers Association.<sup>8</sup> The 1921 *Wid's Yearbook* lists 35 members of the association, including Oliver Marsh, George Folsey, and Ernest Haller. A Motion Picture Directors Association had been orga-

nized at the Astor Hotel in November 1916. Among the 26 charter members were J. Searle Dawley, Allan Dwan, Sidney Olcott, and Maurice Tourneur.<sup>9</sup> Four years later, membership had grown to 40, with Ralph Ince, Wesley Ruggles, and Raoul Walsh among the new members. By 1926 there were 43 members, an indication of the relative stability of East Coast production in this period.<sup>10</sup>

Except for the various actors' associations, these organizations were craft guilds, not unions. But by 1924 the scenic artists, property men, grips, and electricians in the New York studios, unlike their counterparts in Hollywood, did have their own union. In April of that year a secretly formed "green card" organization had been recognized by the American Federation of Labor and chartered as Local 52, Motion Picture Mechanics, "the first union of motion picture craftsmen and technicians organized in the United States."<sup>11</sup> The union's initial demand, grudgingly accepted by the studios, was for a base pay of one dollar an hour.<sup>12</sup> Later, it was able to impose penalty schedules against producers who delayed or avoided lunch breaks. The men who formed this union had worked in the industry during the heyday of Fort Lee, survived the series of fits and starts that had characterized East Coast production ever since, and believed their efforts vindicated with the recognition of their new union by the resident studios. But their success may have come at considerable cost. Although production in the East reached record levels in 1924, within a few years every major studio then operating in New York had shut its doors and moved all activity to the West Coast. Was the collapse of eastern production by 1927 a direct consequence of unionization, or simply an unfortunate coincidence? The Queensboro Chamber of Commerce, reacting to the initial rumors late in 1926, had no doubts: "Labor troubles are said to be one of the controlling reasons for the closing of the local [Paramount] plant, the company not being able to meet the demands of the property, carpenter, and electrical workers." Is this what Jesse Lasky meant when he grumbled about "overhead?"<sup>13</sup>

Many of the charter members of Local 52 were interviewed in the early 1960s by Sam Robert, at the time a prop man and the editor of *Local 52 News*. Those interviews, intended to form the core of a history of the local, not only trace the struggle of these men to establish reasonable working conditions, but also provide a unique snapshot of the fitful New York production situation during the silent feature era. They are available in the Oral History Collection of the Museum of the Moving Image, an institution whose origins can be traced to efforts by Robert and other union members to promote local filmmaking activity in the 1970s.

*Arthur Koenig* entered films as an office boy at the Bronx Edison studio in 1912. His father owned a farm in the neighborhood, and would sometimes rent rooms to the studio when its own dressing room facilities were overcrowded. Koenig dropped out of school to work as an inside prop man (what today is called "best boy") at \$7 a week, with time and a half for overtime. After the war broke out,

Edison brought in Cedric Gibbons to head the department. Together they started what may have been the first studio architecture and design reference library, though Koenig eventually quarreled with Gibbons and moved to Metro. There he was paid between \$35 and \$38 a week as an assistant “outside man,” gathering props from local supply houses. When Metro closed in 1918, Koenig moved to Fox and worked for several years at its various local studios on films like *Over the Hill* (1920). After Fox shut down, Koenig sold mushroom paste before taking a job as prop man for Paramount. Soon he was earning \$85 a week; when the union was organized, he credited it with raising this to \$125, plus double overtime.

*Jack Wright* was a theater usher in Jacksonville, Florida, where he was hired to build sets for the Kalem Company in 1912. By 1916 he was working for Famous Players in New York, but left the business in the early 1920s to work as a driver for the City of New York. When he returned to work as a prop man at Astoria in 1923, the base salary was only \$3 per day, with experienced men earning between \$35 and \$45 for a forty-eight-hour week, time and a half for overtime. After working on films like *A Sainted Devil* (1924) and *A Kiss for Cinderella* (1926), Wright drove to Hollywood with three other displaced studio workers. The others lasted only a week, but Wright stayed until he learned of the revival of production in the East after sound arrived.

*Frank Nelson* was a tinsmith whose first job in films was building a Dutch windmill in New Jersey for a June Caprice film around 1916. A member of the United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners, he continued to work at Fox until being hired as a carpenter by Eddie Mannix at the Talmadge studio (the carpenters were already unionized and controlled the shops; the rest of the workers on the set were not yet organized). When Talmadge moved west, Nelson worked for \$8 a day at Cosmopolitan on films like *Under the Red Robe* (1923). Nelson eventually became foreman of the main stage at Paramount, mediating between the art department and the studio’s construction crews. Years later he was quite critical of the union’s position in the 1920s and claimed that the salary demands of Local 52 had been instrumental in forcing production out of New York.

*Bill “Dad” Nallin* was born in Queens in 1902. In 1919 he worked as a prop man for Famous Players on the *Copperhead* location in Elmhurst and then in various capacities, from prop man to assistant cameraman, for most of the New York studios—among them Vitagraph, Talmadge, Victor, Metro, Biograph, Edison, and many of the Fort Lee studios. His starting salary was \$27.50 for a forty-eight-hour week, plus time and a half. By the time the union came in, he was making \$9 a day. Both before and after unionization Nallin would frequently spend time at The Beach, hoping for day work. Because cameraman George Folsey requested him, Nallin was steadily employed at First National until silent film production in New York shut down. He considered himself lucky to then find work at Fox’s experimental Movietone operation, set up in its 54th Street warehouse.



*Steve Jones* was born in 1893. Trained as an electrician, he operated Cooper-Hewitt lights on some of the first Famous Players productions in Fort Lee. After two years in Florida, he returned to Fort Lee and worked again as a gaffer at Famous Players, as well as for Selznick and Universal. The hours were very long, often because the stars arrived at 2:00 p.m. and worked until midnight. Jones earned \$10 a day, with time and a half for overtime. He worked for Hearst at his various New York studios (for about \$34 a week) and participated in Maude Adams's experiments with incandescent lighting of film sets, done at a studio on Mill Street in Astoria. Later Jones worked on Lee De Forest's sound films and then did the same for Fox (a move from electrician to soundman was not unusual in this period).

### A Studio for a Star

New York had studio facilities, and it had experienced workers, but to support filmmaking on an industrial scale it also needed distribution connections. Film historians tend to focus on those vertically integrated corporations that owned their own studios, distribution operations, and theater chains; independent production operations are generally ignored as out of step with the developing industry economy. But with the creation of First National and United Artists (which distributed Griffith's Mamaroneck films), independent producers could finally count on a national release without having to deal with a corporation like Paramount. Instead of a "classical Hollywood studio system," producers in New York slowly put together a new way of making movies better suited to the demands of niche audiences and idiosyncratic artists.

Among the first to pioneer this new style of production were Joseph and Nicholas Schenck, who had started in the entertainment business by operating theaters and amusement parks in partnership with men like Adolph Zukor and Marcus Loew. Joseph Schenck became a film producer in 1917 and two years later, with the industry in upheaval, moved the releasing contracts of the Talmadge sisters—his wife, Norma, and her sister Constance—from Lewis J. Selznick's Select to the aggressive new First National. First National was a circuit of exhibitors, formed in 1917, that contracted directly with top industry talent in an attempt to circumvent middlemen like Zukor. They made million-dollar deals directly with Charlie Chaplin and Mary Pickford, and for a time released D. W. Griffith's films as well.<sup>14</sup> But in 1919 Chaplin, Pickford, and Griffith suddenly left to form United Artists, and First National scrambled to replace them with whatever talent was available. Schenck understood that the First National deal would immediately project Norma into the first rank of motion picture stars and might also do the same for Constance.

His first move was to put Constance into the hands of Anita Loos and John Emerson, the husband-and-wife team credited with writing and directing the breezy,





John Emerson and Anita Loos working with Constance Talmadge on *Polly of the Follies* (1921), the last film made by the Talmadges in New York. Museum of Modern Art/Film Stills Archive.

modern comedies that had made a star of Douglas Fairbanks. Schenck imported the pair from Hollywood and set them up in a lavish office-apartment at 103 East 75th Street, which he furnished with editing equipment, a screening room, and an extensive reference library.<sup>15</sup> Like so many others, they were delighted to have escaped the West Coast. “New York has everything in the world,” they told one reporter who asked about their new working conditions. “You cannot grow stale in New York. We don’t know about the actors, but from the standpoint of the writer and the director, there is only one place to make pictures in our opinion. And we have tried both.”<sup>16</sup>

The Talmadge films were directed by such anonymous craftsmen as David Kirkland and Chet Withey, but were sold as “John Emerson–Anita Loos Productions,” a unique credit for two filmmakers who were not stars, not directors, and not the corporate heads of their own studio.<sup>17</sup> As Loos put it, “John Emerson, a true devotee of the pleasures of leisure, devised a scheme whereby someone else would do the hard work while he lolled in a camp chair and supervised.”<sup>18</sup> Most of this free time seems to have been spent shopping or lunching with Irving Berlin at Dinty

Moore's. Loos's own status as a literary celebrity would not develop until her publication of *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* in 1925.

Schenck then used some of First National's money to enlarge and improve the old studio at 318 East 48th Street, where he had been working for the last two years. (His future brother-in-law, Buster Keaton, had made his first films in this studio while appearing in Schenck's Paramount-Arbuckle comedies in 1917.) He leased the adjacent building, known as the Oliver studio, tore down interior walls, and moved all the dressing rooms into the new building. Along with the adjoining Lee Lash scenic studio building, this created a motion picture "super block" between First and Second Avenues and 47th and 48th Streets. There were two floors of stage space at "The Talmadge Studio," and Norma usually worked downstairs while Constance was busy on the upstairs stage.<sup>19</sup> Schenck and his studio manager, Eddie Mannix, were extraordinarily efficient in operating this tight little ship.<sup>20</sup> During the time they made their First National pictures here, both Constance and Norma were able to appear in a new feature film every three months.

In films like *A Virtuous Vamp* (1919), *In Search of a Siren* (1920), and *The Love Expert* (1920), Emerson and Loos successfully crafted a new image for Constance as the prototypical young woman of the 1920s—slim, blonde, athletic, good-humored, and romantically aggressive. Norma, on the other hand, was positioned as the long-suffering queen of society melodrama, often under the direction of men like Herbert Brenon in such films as *The Sign on the Door* and *The Passion Flower* (both 1921).

In an unusually graphic image for 1921, Harrison Ford shoots Robert Agnew over the love of Norma Talmadge. From *The Passion Flower* (1921), directed by Herbert Brenon at the Talmadge studio on East 48th Street. Museum of Modern Art/Film Stills Archive.



If Gloria Swanson and Mary Pickford occasionally tried to vary their roles, Norma Talmadge never changed. By 1923 Robert E. Sherwood was not alone in dismissing her as “stereotyped” and “terribly monotonous,” but her fans remained loyal throughout the silent period.<sup>21</sup> For better or worse, both characterizations were created during the Talmadges’ years in New York.

Following the production of *Polly of the Follies* in late 1921, Schenck suddenly decided to move his entire operation to California. “The filming of our silent movies in New York was marked by nonchalance, not to say élan,” wrote Anita Loos in her memoir of the Talmadges. “Norma’s troupe occupied the ground floor of a ramshackle New York studio that was as lively as a Keystone farce. . . . Those crude old silent films that Joe Schenck produced with so little effort and so much fun had a vitality missing from many a Hollywood superspectacle that costs time, energy, and millions of dollars.”<sup>22</sup> Loos may have had contempt for Hollywood, a place where her career as a screenwriter would continue to flourish, but her use of words like “crude” and “ramshackle” suggests why Joe Schenck might have been willing to leave New York. And perhaps there were other reasons. Sigmund Meyerson, once an electrician at the studio, claimed that Schenck left New York because of the general air of graft and corruption, specifically citing harassment over reputed fire safety and building code violations.<sup>23</sup> It seems unlikely that the man who ran Palisades Park would have fled in the face of a few corrupt building inspectors. But thirty years later, independent producers in New York would still be putting a line for “schmear” into their budgets.<sup>24</sup>

### Selznick

Despite the existence of distributors like United Artists and First National, not every producer who needed aggressive national distribution (and entrée to the most lucrative downtown theaters) was able to find it. In 1918 Lewis J. Selznick had accepted Adolph Zukor as his silent partner in Select Pictures, a move that temporarily removed the Selznick name from Broadway (apparently Zukor had insisted). To remedy this, he established Selznick Pictures Corporation the following year with his twenty-year-old son, Myron, as nominal president, a ploy to circumvent an agreement that prevented L.J. from entering production on his own.<sup>25</sup> This chicanery resulted in a bitter struggle with Zukor, but Selznick bought out his partner and continued to operate Select, releasing films made by a range of other producers, including Hearst (*The Belle of New York*) and Schenck (*The Heart of Wetona*).

Selznick moved back to the Bronx Biograph studio in 1919 and over the next few months expanded into the Solax, Peerless, and Universal studios in Fort Lee. By 1920 the bulk of his production activity was located at yet another Fort Lee studio,

the Paragon.<sup>26</sup> Selznick certainly needed the space. He shot at least seventy-eight features in these studios, as well as producing short films and the *Kinograms* newsreel (later *The Selznick News*), which claimed to be the only newsreel of the day to incorporate a “women’s supplement.”<sup>27</sup> That same year he signed an exclusive contract with Prizmacolor, promising not only to distribute its short color travelogues but also to supervise a series of dramatic Prizmacolor features adapted from “famous novels and plays.”<sup>28</sup>

So it was hardly surprising when Selznick followed Griffith, Fox, Metro, and Zukor in announcing the construction of a great new studio in the East. What did raise some eyebrows was that Selznick’s studio was to be built in Long Island City, the same area selected by his bitter rival Adolph Zukor as the site of the Famous Players–Lasky studio. Olive Thomas was the first star Myron had signed, and her first two films, *Upstairs and Down* and *The Spite Bride* (both 1919), were shot on the West Coast. “When we had completed them we realized thoroughly that the advantages of California were grossly exaggerated,” Myron said. “So we came back to New York before we signed up our other stars, and the fact that we are going to have this big studio in Long Island City shows what we think of the advantages of the East.”<sup>29</sup> He put the case a bit more bluntly in another interview. “All this stuff about California being the only place to make moving pictures is bunk,” he told the *Moving Picture World*.

There is absolutely nothing in this California talk. The weather out there is just as uncertain as in the East, and since so great a part of the picture is devoted to interiors, a studio in New York is as good as a studio anywhere else and probably a lot better. Besides, production in New York makes possible the closest cooperation between the producing and administrative branches. What’s more, you can get more and better actors in New York than you can begin to get in California.<sup>30</sup>

There were also some very specific local advantages, as Myron was quick to remind the local chamber of commerce. “The one thing California has in greater abundance than the East is sunshine,” he told them.

But in the winter, when sunshine is at a premium, you cannot depend on it in California any more than you can here. Rainy spells are of longer duration, usually followed and preceded by several cloudy days. So far as the much vaunted California scenery is concerned, there is scarcely any sort of scene you can want that cannot be reached in one day’s drive from New York, by train or motor. Why, some of the finest desert scenes ever put on the screen were made on the Long Island sand dunes out in the direction of Montauk Point. And

when you want an industrial plant for a background, California has nothing like the variety and dimensions of the factories which we have within an easy walk of our new studio.<sup>31</sup>

And in addition to all these good reasons, there was the most fundamental reason of all. "New York is the headquarters and distributing source of the Selznick Company," L.J. told the editors of *Photoplay*. "I prefer to have production within close reach. A lot can happen three thousand miles away."<sup>32</sup>

Selznick acquired a square block on the south side of Queens Boulevard, bounded by Honeywell, Moore, and Nelson Streets and next door to the Packard Motor Car plant (today, the area between 34th and 35th Streets). The site was just across the railroad yards from Adolph Zukor's new studio, and the proposed structure was almost identical to it in appearance, except for a more imposing treatment of the entrance colonnade. The similarities were no coincidence. Selznick had hired the same builder, the Fleischmann Construction Company, and given it the same budget of \$2 million within which to work. Interior blueprints indicate that Selznick's studio was to have everything that Zukor's had, plus billiard and smoking rooms.<sup>33</sup> As late as January 31, 1920, the trade papers were reporting that "the major portion of Selznick pictures will be produced at the Ft. Lee and Bronx studios until the big studio in Long Island City is completed."<sup>34</sup> But even though L.J. sent sons Myron and David to California in June to wrap up whatever production remained there, he never did build that gigantic studio in Long Island City.<sup>35</sup>

Perhaps Selznick had to cancel his plans for the studio when he was caught in the same economic slowdown that hit Paramount, a slump so severe that it would force Paramount to shut its own Long Island City studio only months after opening it. But that closing occurred a year or more after the last mention of Selznick's studio appeared in print. And recession or not, Selznick's cost-efficient productions seemed immune to postwar economic conditions. He released twenty-eight features in 1920 and twenty-four more in 1921. It seems more likely that Selznick never intended to spend \$2 million on a studio in Long Island City, was quite happy renting space wherever it was most cheaply available, and raised the possibility of building one as a means of promoting himself at the expense of Adolph Zukor, whom he loathed.

Selznick's was then the busiest production company in the East, a pace he was able to maintain only because of his modest star roster and very tightly controlled budgets. According to an unsigned column in the studio house paper, *The Brain Exchange* (edited by his younger son, David), "For the Selznick product it is claimed that economy does not mean restriction; rather does a liberal outlay, under proper guidance make for a better appearance and work results that actually show in the picture. Holding a company idle for three days while the director waits upon the mood of a horse who is expected to 'laugh' may be all right, but Mr. Selznick claims that he spends his production money with more sanity and with vastly better re-



sults.”<sup>36</sup> This defensive remark, issued during the wave of publicity generated by Erich von Stroheim’s lavish production of *Foolish Wives*, suggests that Selznick knew exactly how vulnerable he was on this issue.

Despite the large number of films produced by the Selznick Pictures Corporation, very few are available for viewing today. Plot summaries indicate a narrow range of production designed to keep costs as low as possible. There were few period or costume films, and nothing requiring the construction of elaborate sets—at least until the studio’s ill-starred swan song, *Rupert of Hentzau* (1923). Clearly, no one at the Selznick studio spent very much time waiting for a horse to laugh. Theatrical stars rarely appeared. One exception was Elsie Janis, who starred in two films, the first of which, *A Regular Girl* (1919), traded directly on the fame she earned entertaining doughboys at the front.<sup>37</sup> Indeed, Selznick also avoided the use of theatrical texts as source material—a problem with many features in this period—and instead depended more on original scenarios or loose adaptations of novels, a clever decision that freed his directors from the necessity of spending large amounts of time in drawing-room sets.

Nearly half of Selznick’s films were vehicles for two minor stars who had worked for him at the old World Film Corporation: the bland action hero Eugene O’Brien, who starred in seventeen films, and the colorless ingénue Elaine Hammerstein, who appeared in eighteen. Eight films featured Ziegfeld Follies beauty Olive Thomas, who died under mysterious circumstances in a Paris hotel room in 1920. Selznick replaced her in the lineup with Conway Tearle, a second-rank matinee idol who appeared in ten more films. Another eight starred Owen Moore, a friendly Irishman with a drinking problem who had just been divorced by Mary Pickford. This low-rent roster was matched by the general ambiance of the studios themselves. Selznick had been able to pick up space in these abandoned stages for a song. Although only a few years old, all of them had been designed in a different era for a very different type of filmmaking, and most still depended on sunlight filtering through the great greenhouse windows that surrounded them on all sides.

*The Brain Exchange* described a busy day at the Paragon studio, with three production companies vying for space, light, and electrical power: “In one corner of the studio Miss Hammerstein was working on a schoolhouse set for her new production, *Remorseless Love*, in which more than a hundred small children extras were employed, and another set found Eugene O’Brien in the midst of a big company of principals and extras who were enacting a big barn dance scene for his *Clay Dollars*. [Conway] Tearle’s company was comprised of a vast number of character players and extras who will appear in the big Chinese scene in his forthcoming play, *Shadows of the Sea*.”<sup>38</sup> This string of superlatives, and especially the repeated use of words like “big,” suggests not only how meager Selznick’s operation really was, but also how hard he had to work to disguise the fact.

Like the other New York producers, Selznick left the studio to take advantage of



nearby locations as often as possible. Exteriors for *The Country Cousin* (1919) were shot in Cooperstown, New York; *A Fool and His Money* (1920), at the upstate resort town of Thousand Islands; *Whispers* (1920), in Washington, D.C.; and *Soul and Body* (1921), in Gloucester, Massachusetts, with additional shipboard scenes done off Montauk Point.<sup>39</sup> From time to time he used the city itself as a backdrop, filming on New York's elevated tracks for P. G. Wodehouse's *Picadilly Jim* (1919) and at Carnegie Hall for *We the People* (1920).<sup>40</sup> In October 1920 it was reported that Selznick had acquired an electrical generating truck which was being made available for lease to other producers.<sup>41</sup> This made location filming even easier, and helped to reduce congestion at the greenhouse studios. A surviving Olive Thomas vehicle called *The Flapper* (1920) has relatively few interiors but many exteriors shot in Florida, on a Fifth Avenue double-decker bus, at the Plaza Hotel, and in some snowy region where fashionable winter sports could be worked into the story (Lake Placid?). Alan Crosland directed this film, as well as *Is Life Worth Living?* (1921), which starred Eugene O'Brien and Winifred Westover, and made good use of street exteriors in front of The Tombs and the old Criminal Courts Building. The scenes of O'Brien wandering in Central Park as he contemplates suicide display an element of dark humor very rare in films of this period.

Selznick's stars may have been quickly forgotten, but his lean and aggressive operation was more interesting than its reputation suggests. First, it set a model for cost-efficient East Coast production that would influence local filmmakers for decades to come. The studio served as an incubator for talent, offering opportunities to many newcomers that would never have been available at Paramount or

Filming Olive Thomas in *Footlights and Shadows* (1920), produced by Selznick at one of the abandoned studios he had leased in Fort Lee. Museum of Modern Art/Film Stills Archive.



Fox. Rudolph Valentino (*The Wonderful Chance*, 1920), Ronald Colman (*Handcuffs or Kisses*, 1921, his first American film), Norma Shearer (*Channing of the North West*, 1922), and Mary Astor (*John Smith*, 1922) all played small parts for Selznick before achieving stardom elsewhere. The directors Selznick hired were experienced craftsmen, reliable and imaginative, but not among the industry's most famous or best paid. He turned most frequently to Ralph Ince, who until 1916 had spent nearly his entire career at Vitagraph. Ince is a mysterious figure in cinema history and was long overshadowed by—and sometimes confused with—his older brother Tom, the noted Hollywood producer. According to one recent critic, Ralph Ince was the true innovator, a neglected pioneer who should be credited as “the first master of continuity cinema,” that is, the director who first began breaking down scenes into the shot–reverse shot format that marks what is called the “classical Hollywood cinema.”<sup>42</sup>

Another veteran on the staff, George Archainbaud, was one of the French directors who had worked with Selznick when he was general manager of William A. Brady's World Film Corporation during the war.<sup>43</sup> Archainbaud was an unpretentious stylist whom Selznick frequently teamed with his leading ingénue, Elaine Hammerstein (*The Miracle of Manhattan* [1921]); his lengthy career ended in television Westerns during the 1950s. His Eugene O'Brien vehicle, *The Wonderful Chance*, is a perfectly acceptable pot-boiler, of interest today mainly because the role of the villain was played by Rudolph Valentino. Alan Crosland, a younger director with fresher ideas, would win his place in history a few years later by directing the early Vitaphone classics *Don Juan* (1926) and *The Jazz Singer* (1927). He directed *The Flapper* with real panache and drew a charming performance from Olive Thomas. “I shall probably become a dope fiend—to forget,” her character jokes here, in what was probably intended as an amusing throwaway line. But given the rumors surrounding Thomas's death later that year, it was a joke with especially macabre overtones.<sup>44</sup> Ince, Archainbaud, and Crosland (along with a truly obscure fourth, William P. S. Earle) directed nearly two-thirds of the films Selznick made in New York, suggesting that the studio's output must have been considerably more interesting than what was coming out of Vitagraph's Flatbush studio during those same months, for example.

But the most important legacy of the Selznick Pictures Corporation was certainly the career of David O. Selznick himself. As historian Ron Haver makes clear, the family's experience in New York was crucial in forming the youngest son's later vision of himself as an independent filmmaker.<sup>45</sup> From the time he was a small boy, L.J. taught David to involve himself in every aspect of production, from casting and script development straight through to advertising and exploitation. His father's fate at the hands of more powerful rivals was an even stronger lesson, a family insult he sought not just to avoid, but to avenge. Years later, he wrote that “there are

only two kinds of merchandise that can be made profitably in this business—either the very cheap or the very expensive pictures.”<sup>46</sup> David O. Selznick’s risky decision to produce independent films with large budgets was clearly a result of Lewis Selznick’s experience in New York and led directly to the string of successes that culminated in *Gone with the Wind*.

By the end of 1921 Selznick had abandoned his studios in Fort Lee and the Bronx and consolidated production activities at the recently vacated Talmadge studio.<sup>47</sup> Two years later, his empire collapsed. Despite operating his own exchange system, Selznick was pushed to the wall by Paramount and First National, fully integrated corporations capable of luring away his stars, cutting him off from key exhibition sites, and starving him of the revenue needed to keep the costly production and distribution operations afloat.

### Whitman Bennett

It was clear that the existence of the First National circuit had been instrumental in transforming Norma Talmadge from a mere star into an international screen icon (one 1923 survey cited her \$10,000 weekly salary as by far the greatest in the industry).<sup>48</sup> Instead of having to sell her films in the states rights market or through shaky middlemen like Selznick, Joseph Schenck had been able to sign directly with a powerful exhibitors’ organization that was hungry for product. Other producers (including Louis B. Mayer in Hollywood) also took advantage of First National this way, and in New York, perhaps the most interesting of them was Whitman Bennett. A Harvard graduate, Bennett had worked in the theater with the Shuberts and in the late 1910s served for a time as the East Coast production manager for Famous Players–Lasky (a position later filled by the similarly qualified Walter Wanger).<sup>49</sup> Bennett understood production conditions in New York, and he also knew that First National would need a steady supply of product, not just a few high-profile releases from celebrity actors or directors. With Kenneth Webb as director and Lionel Barrymore as star, he founded Whitman Bennett Productions and soon landed a First National contract of his own. In the summer of 1920 Bennett moved into the Reliance studio at 537 Riverdale Avenue, which Mutual had built in 1914 on the site of the old Clara Morris homestead.<sup>50</sup> The glass-enclosed studio consisted of a single 65 × 110-foot stage, with associated vaults, offices, and a film laboratory. A geographic oddity, its 3-acre plot straddled the city line, with 2.4 acres legally in Yonkers, and the remainder located in the Riverdale section of the Bronx.<sup>51</sup>

Working under a one-year contract with First National, Bennett supplied it with eight inexpensive program pictures, half starring Barrymore, the others featuring Pauline Starke or May MacAvoy. Barrymore was just then at the height of his stage success with plays like *The Copperhead* (filmed by FP-L in 1919) and *The Jest*, but he

was also an extremely busy motion picture actor, making some forty features in the East from the mid-1910s to the mid-1920s. In addition to working for people like Bennett, he appeared in big-budget films for Griffith, Hearst, and Paramount. Years later, Barrymore expressed the conventional prejudice of a major theatrical star in disdaining all the East Coast features he acted in while moonlighting from his real career on Broadway. His only worthwhile films, he insisted, were made in Hollywood.<sup>52</sup>

But even if they were quickly produced, the Bennett films used first-class technical personnel and were adapted from stage plays cleverly chosen to showcase the star. Barrymore played an obsessed alienist in *The Master Mind* (1920) and a Raffles-like forger in *Jim the Penman* (1921); for *The Great Adventure* (1921, an adaptation of Arnold Bennett's *Buried Alive*) he was the world's greatest artist, hiding from publicity by faking his own death. Most of the films were photographed by Harry Stradling, later a very distinguished cameraman working in England, France, Hollywood, and (on *A Face in the Crowd*, 1957) New York City.

According to an interview in *Film Play Journal*, Bennett quit FP-L after three and a half years because "I couldn't subscribe to the principles of Wall Street. I was not afraid to take chances, which Wall Street was." He complained that his four Barrymore films, hits in New York, fell flat in the rest of the country, where audiences wanted "the Wallace Reid type." The first of these, *The Devil's Garden* (1921), was banned outright in three states, costing Bennett thousands in lost revenue. Caught in the postwar economic downturn, he quickly learned to produce less "unusual" subjects and to keep a careful eye on expenses.<sup>53</sup> While filming *Salvation Nell* with Pauline Starke in January 1921, he had to construct a springtime exterior inside the studio. Instead of building this landscape from scratch, he used his industry connections to scrounge up the scenery from existing elements, asking his friend Lee Shubert if "I could borrow the two apple-trees which you used in *Maytime*," which he knew were still squirreled away in some Shubert warehouse.<sup>54</sup>

When Barrymore left Bennett, the First National contract went with him. But Bennett recognized that the East Coast market needed a well-run "single unit picture producing plant" and bought the studio he had been renting for \$125,000.<sup>55</sup> He subsequently rented the facility to stars like George Arliss (*Disraeli*, 1921), Betty Blythe (*How Women Love*, 1922), and Francis X. Bushman and Beverly Bayne (*Modern Marriage*, 1923), occasionally filling in with work of his own, like *Secrets of Paris* (1922) and *The Hoosier Schoolmaster* (1924). Most of these films were done in association with Kenneth Webb and Harry Stradling, but in 1924 Bennett began directing them himself. For distribution, Bennett now turned to companies like Vitagraph, Arrow, and Chadwick, which were then selling inexpensive potboilers to small-town theaters. He made *Scandal Street* (1925) with Madge Kennedy, an odd story of a man taking over the identity of a dead film star, and *Lena Rivers* (1925), an adaptation of the famous barnstorming melodrama. *Children of the Whirlwind* (1925), again with



Lionel Barrymore (who had once tried to establish himself as an artist in Paris) starred in dozens of silent features in New York, including Whitman Bennett's *The Great Adventure* (1921).

Lionel Barrymore, was the last film Bennett made at his Riverdale studio before the property was purchased by the College of Mount St. Vincent. He had made twenty-nine features there in just under four years.<sup>56</sup> Before the college moved in, a few other producers used the stages, including Banner Productions, whose *Daughters Who Pay* (1925) was directed by George Terwilliger. Bennett focused his energies on finding a new eastern studio, and in May 1925 he paid \$110,000 for the Mirror studio in Glendale, Queens.<sup>57</sup>

### The Mirror Studio

The new studio was located at Myrtle Avenue and 88th Lane (3021 Myrtle Avenue), and although it was definitely in Queens, Bennett's trade ads insisted on placing it in Brooklyn. He renamed it the Whitman Bennett Studio and, as before, prepared

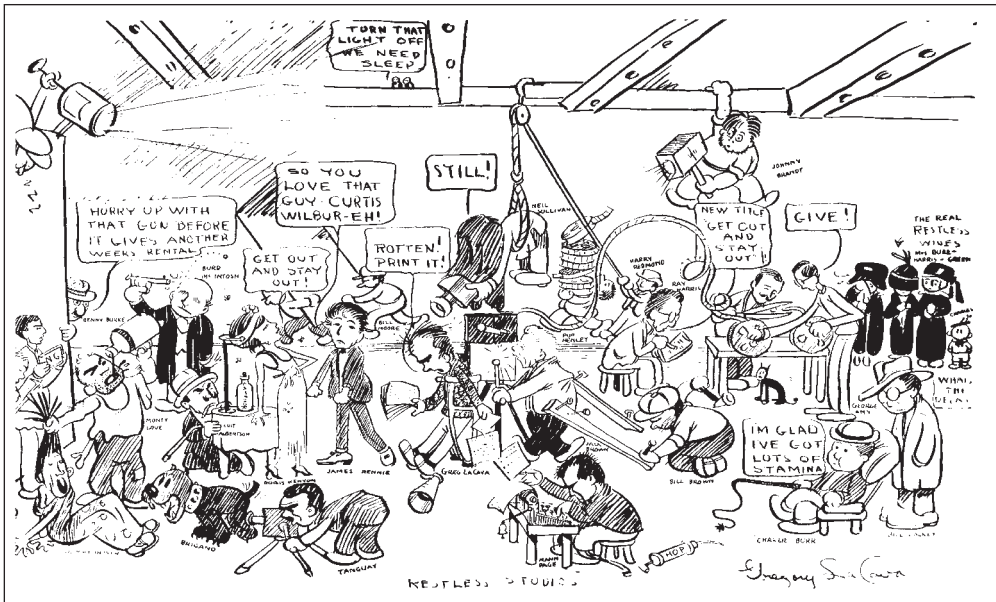


to make a few films of his own and rent out the stage space, electrical equipment, and whatever sets remained in storage to other independent producers. The stage was considerably larger than the one in Riverdale, 80 × 130 feet, with a 25-foot ceiling height, but it was certainly not a state-of-the-art facility.<sup>58</sup> Bennett soon put a Jane Novak picture into production (*Share and Share Alike*, 1925), which appears to have been the last film he ever made. With the amount of independent production in New York shrinking and better equipped facilities competing for what business remained, the Glendale studio was soon abandoned as obsolete. The Herman Jans production *Ermine and Rhinestones* (1925) may have been the last film shot there.<sup>59</sup> The studio became a skating rink and dancehall called the Glendale Palace, then a bowling alley and banquet hall. As Sportland, it was demolished to make way for the Interboro Parkway late in 1933.<sup>60</sup>

The brief association with Whitman Bennett may have been the end of the Mirror studio, but in earlier days it had been quite active, hosting a steady stream of comedy shorts, industrials, and the occasional low-budget feature. The building had been constructed some time before 1910 as Riebling's Greater New York Park Dancing Pavilion, and the property was later known as Glendale Casino Park.<sup>61</sup> At that time it consisted of a large dance hall capable of holding one thousand people, with a dining room on the second floor and bowling alleys and shooting galleries in the basement. Mirror Films, Inc. purchased the building and adjacent grounds in 1915 and renovated the space for use as a rental studio.<sup>62</sup> The first significant tenant was the Empire All Star Company, producer of Albert Capellani's *American Maid*, Dell Henderson's *Please Help Emily*, and *The Unforeseen*, with Olive Tell and David Powell, all shot in 1917.<sup>63</sup> Two years later the American Cinema Corporation used the Mirror studio for *The Inner Voice*, an E. K. Lincoln picture, and in 1922 the Film Guild produced *The Cradle Buster* and *Second Fiddle* here, both starring Glenn Hunter.<sup>64</sup> In the postwar period the studio was most closely associated with C. C. Burr, a low-budget producer whose Master Films and Mastodon Pictures released directly into the states rights market. Burr was farther down the food chain than Whitman Bennett. He had been making the successful "Torchy" comedies since 1920, taking space at various local studios as circumstances allowed.<sup>65</sup> These two-reelers starred Johnny Hines as the red-headed office boy from the popular series of stories by Sewell Ford.

By 1922 Burr seems to have moved his operation to Glendale and apparently purchased the Mirror studio by the end of the following year.<sup>66</sup> Burr hired film animator Gregory La Cava as a gag man on the last few "Torchy" comedies and then promoted him to director of his next series of two-reelers, the Charlie Murray "All Star Comedies," which were shot in Glendale in 1922–1923 and distributed by Hodkinson.<sup>67</sup> *The Four Orphans* (1922), one of the few surviving La Cava shorts, has the feel of a much later Hal Roach film, with an emphasis on middle-class situation comedy and a relative lack of slapstick. It also makes good use of the fresh locations





A cartoon by Gregory La Cava caricaturing the production of *Restless Wives* (1924), which La Cava directed at C. C. Burr's Mirror studio in Glendale. Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences.

provided by suburban Glendale. Burr and Hines had already made a feature picture about another Torchy-esque character, *Burn 'em up Barnes* (1921), while still at the 54th Street studio, and continued the series in Glendale with *Sure Fire Flint* (1922) and *Luck* (1923).<sup>68</sup> During this period Burr also produced La Cava's *Restless Wives* (1924, with Doris Kenyon) and *The New School Teacher* (1924), a vehicle for vaudevilian Charles "Chic" Sale. According to one source, La Cava spent only \$35,000 on *Restless Wives*, a remarkably low sum even for a threadbare operation like Burr's.<sup>69</sup>

Among the outside productions that leased space from Burr in Glendale were Ernest Shipman's *The River Road* and T. Hayes Hunter's *The Sky Raider* (1925), with the French air ace Captain Charles Nungesser.<sup>70</sup> In May 1925 Burr and Hines signed a releasing deal with First National, and it was when they moved out of Glendale that Whitman Bennett moved in. Their subsequent New York films, including *The Early Bird*, *The Crackerjack*, *The Live Wire*, *Rainbow Riley*, and *The Brown Derby* were shot at the more sumptuous Tec-Art studio on Jackson Avenue in the Bronx.<sup>71</sup>

### The "Full Service" Studio

An elaborate three-studio complex operating in both Manhattan and the Bronx, Tec-Art perfected the "full-service" rental studio model in New York. The idea had been developed by the Tilford Cinema Corporation, one of the first to adver-

tise that it “would produce your entire picture or any phase of it within a definite time for a definite sum on contract.”<sup>72</sup> Neither a traditional studio (like Paramount Astoria) nor “an empty loft with a lamp in it,” the full-service rental studio was a crucial step in the evolution of East Coast film production. Tilford had begun in a small space at 165 West 31st Street, where Harry Houdini filmed *The Man from Beyond* (1921) and *Haldane of the Secret Service* (1922). Lejaren à Hiller and Herbert Blaché made *The Beggar Maid* here in 1921, the first of a series of dramatic shorts “inspired” by famous paintings (most featuring a very young Mary Astor).<sup>73</sup> Tilford later relocated to the old Amsterdam Opera House at 344 West 44th Street, which Famous Players–Lasky had converted into a film studio in 1919. When Zukor moved to Astoria, the 44th Street studio had remained busy as an upscale rental facility (known for a time as the Perry studio), hosting films like Mae Murray’s *Peacock Alley*.<sup>74</sup> Interiors for John Barrymore’s *Sherlock Holmes*, a Goldwyn film whose location work was done in England, were shot at the 44th Street Tilford studio in September 1922.<sup>75</sup>

In addition to the large number of rental studios, which anchored the industrial infrastructure on which the health of the local film industry depended, New York provided another kind of infrastructure, a network of investors, inventors, entrepreneurs, and creative talent that periodically breathed life into those abandoned lofts and warehouses. This explains the proliferation throughout this period of start-up companies developing such new technologies as sound, color, wide screen, and even 3-D movies, experiments far less evident in the bustling factory town of Hollywood.

To take just one example, Laurence Hammond and William F. Cassidy, young Cornell graduates, had devised a fresh mechanical solution to the problem of stereoscopic cinema.<sup>76</sup> They attracted investors, leased space at the Tilford studio, and used local talent (director Roy William Neill and cameraman George Folsey) to produce a six-reel feature known variously as *Mars Calling*, *Radio-Mania*, and *M.A.R.S.* (1922). Like Lee De Forest’s Phonofilm and Fred Waller’s Cinerama, Hammond and Cassidy’s Televue depended on these overlapping infrastructures to transform their idea into a commercial product. Televue was an “eclipse” style stereo system in which audiences watched the screen through a specially designed shutter/viewer which blacked out first one eye, then the other. Synchronized projectors in the booth threw alternate right eye/left eye images on-screen in succession (not simultaneously, as in anaglyph or Polaroid 3-D formats). The principle is used today in some 3-D video systems and the 3-D IMAX process.

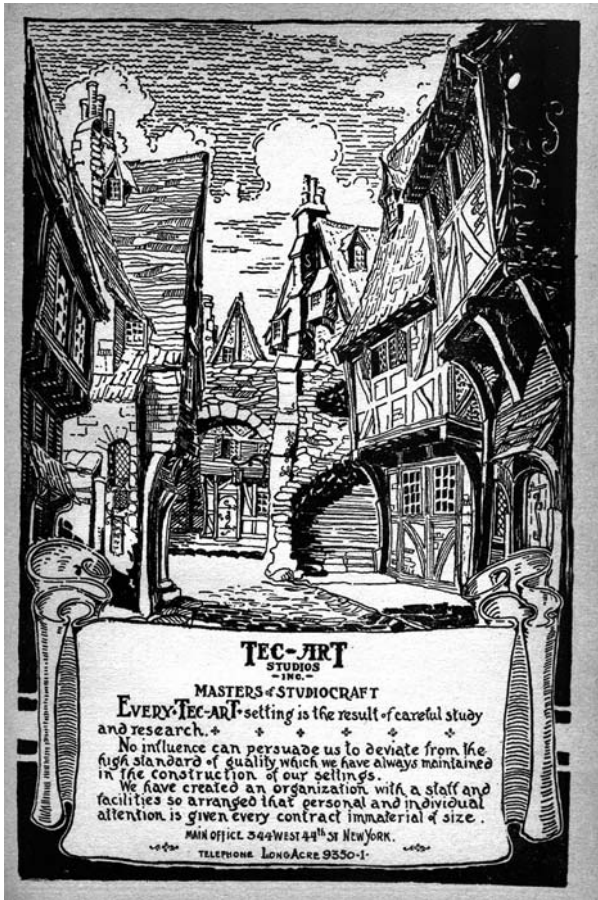
On December 27, 1922, *M.A.R.S.* opened at the Selwyn Theatre, which had been wired with hundreds of the special viewers—a substantial installation cost that helped doom the system. To make matters worse, the feature picture, in which inventor Grant Mitchell communicates with the red planet, was considered unimpressive, “drawn out to a tedious length and burdened with much dreary humor in the subtitles.”<sup>77</sup> On the other hand, an associated program of shorts, ranging

from abstract patterns to travelogues, was better received. "Plain geometrical circles seemed to dance right back through the theatre, row by row," wrote one newspaper, a tantalizing hint that what seemed most impressive here was a bit of abstract animation, an achievement that would have seemed avant-garde even in two dimensions.<sup>78</sup> Oddly enough, a rival anaglyph 3-D system, for which audience members donned red-and-green eyeglasses ("Plastigrams"), had premiered its own series of stereo vignettes at the Rivoli only a few days earlier.<sup>79</sup>

After Joseph Schenck and the Talmadges moved west, a rival to Tilford's full-service operation was quickly set up in their old studio on East 48th Street under the name Tec-Art. Charles Brabin's *Driven*, *Timothy's Quest* by Sidney Olcott, and *The Headless Horseman*, starring Will Rogers, were typical of the wide range of independent productions shot here in 1922 alone.<sup>80</sup> Exteriors for *The Headless Horseman* were taken on location in Washington Irving country, at times on historic sites controlled by the Rockefeller family.<sup>81</sup> The first film said to have been shot entirely on Eastman's new panchromatic negative, *The Headless Horseman* made good use of the new stock's suitability for cloudscapes, day-for-night effects, and other sophisticated photographic touches.<sup>82</sup>

Tec-Art absorbed Tilford in July 1924 and expanded again the following year, when it took over the Jackson studio at 723 Forest Avenue in the Bronx, actually a three-block complex located at the intersection of Jackson, Forest, and Westchester Avenues.<sup>83</sup> Tec-Art's trade ad in the 1926 *Film Year Book* asked, "PRODUCERS!!! What does your overhead cost between pictures? Are your screen values commensurate with studio costs? YOU ARE WASTING MONEY! We contract to design, construct, erect, decorate and furnish your settings complete with studio space for an exact figure."<sup>84</sup> The operation emphasized the building of sets because it was run by a group of scenic artists: Alfred T. Mannon was the in-house art director; Albert D'Agostino, the technical director; Charles Ohmann, the designer; and William Heine, the lighting effects technician. Now in control of the Jackson, Talmadge, and 44th Street studios, Tec-Art flourished so long as independent production in New York continued to grow. This same 1926 advertisement listed thirty-three films recently shot at Tec-Art, including six with Richard Barthelmess, five starring Johnny Hines, Natacha Rambova's *When Love Grows Cold*, and scattered films featuring Clara Bow (*The Adventurous Sex*), Alice Joyce (*Headlines*), and Ann Pennington (*The Mad Dancer*). Unfortunately, production in New York collapsed soon afterward, and the Tec-Art operation moved west. Albert D'Agostino began a lengthy career in Hollywood, where he designed many classic horror films for both Universal and RKO's Val Lewton.<sup>85</sup>

At the same time, a smaller rental facility, the so-called Long Island studio, was operating successfully at 75 Mill Street in Astoria (later known as 109 First Avenue and 37-19 First Avenue), just two blocks from the 92nd Street ferry terminal. The building had been constructed in 1904 as a generating station for the New York &



Trade advertisement taken by Tec-Art studios in the 1926 *Film Year Book* promoting its full-service production facility for independent producers.

Queens Railway Corporation and was later used as a scenery storage warehouse by Oscar Hammerstein.<sup>86</sup> In 1920 it was converted for use as a motion picture studio. Trade advertisements boasted of “two large rooms” measuring  $70 \times 125$  feet and  $62 \times 82$  feet, with a ceiling height varying from 20 to 30 feet.<sup>87</sup> Because the owner/operators were not producers themselves, the studio’s history can be traced only in the coverage of its tenants, a motley crew involved in everything from educational films to features to serials to comedy shorts. The way in which the building passed from one hand to another, sometimes rising in status, more often falling, is typical of the fate of most of these small studios. To make this history even more difficult to follow, the owners periodically changed not just the studio’s formal address but also its name, sometimes calling it the Astra studio, the Pyramid studio, or just the Long Island studio (which makes for considerable confusion when Paramount stars are reported as working “at the Long Island studio”).

Messmore Kendall, a partner in the Capitol Theatre, produced several films at this studio in 1920, including *Pardon My French* with Vivian Martin. But as was

often the case with studios and producers working on the margins of the industry, Kendall was being sued for back rent within a matter of months.<sup>88</sup> William Randolph Hearst followed Kendall, put his own name on the studio, and shot *Find the Woman* and *The Beauty Shop* there in 1921 while his own studio was under renovation.<sup>89</sup> Maude Adams later worked here while experimenting with incandescent lighting and new color film technology.<sup>90</sup> Pyramid Pictures renamed the studio again when it made several films there in 1922, including *Queen of the Moulin Rouge* with Martha Mansfield.<sup>91</sup> Dorothea Herzog visited the set, an elaborate re-creation of the Parisian café constructed by art director Ben Carré.

Director Ray Smallwood came to the front to issue directions for the Moulin Rouge scene. He gave them to his assistant, Mr. McGuire, who, in a sonorous voice, shouted them to the extras.

“On the floor, those of you in the dance scene,” he boomed.

About fifty couples straggled from the tables, leaving two hundred or so smoking and chatting and looking on.

“We’ll rehearse this scene first,” instructed Director Smallwood, who appeared weary.

At a signal, the orchestra struck up a merry jazz, and the couples started whirling madly. . . .

Director Smallwood shook his head. “Not enough pep.”

McGuire stopped the racket. “Look here, you folks,” he shouted. “This is Paris. You’re gay. You’re cutting up. You don’t care who knows it. NOW, try it again! Make it wild.”<sup>92</sup>

In 1923 the Film Guild, working from an F. Scott Fitzgerald original, shot *Grit* at the Pyramid studio; a teenaged Clara Bow stole the picture from Glenn Hunter and Osgood Perkins. The Guild returned the following year, under contract to the Chronicles of America Corporation, to film parts of *The Puritans*, and Bela Lugosi and Lila Lee made *The Midnight Girl* there in 1925. At least two Pathé serials, *The Green Archer* and *Casey of the Coast Guard*, were shot there the same year. Pathé threw a lavish party on the Hudson River castle interiors built for *The Green Archer*, and with some ceremony crowned Allene Ray “Queen of Serials” (which, after the retirement of Pearl White, she certainly was). Ann Pennington was reported to be making a series of two-reel color films for Joseph Levering at the Long Island Studio in early 1926.<sup>93</sup>

The studio’s last known tenant was Charley Bowers, a brilliant animator who produced, directed, and starred in his own pixilated Whirlwind Comedies in 1926 and 1927, including *Egged On* and *A Wild Roomer*.<sup>94</sup> Bowers often played a stock hayseed character, and his films took full advantage of the farms and fields still available all over that portion of Queens. The fact that the studio fronted on the East River





A very young Clara Bow in *Grit*, a Film Guild production shot at the Pyramid studio in Astoria in 1923. Museum of Modern Art/Film Stills Archive.

was also an advantage; at least one scene from his masterpiece, *Now I'll Tell One* (1926), is played out against a background of the Hell's Gate Bridge.<sup>95</sup>

The *grande dame* of the city's rental facilities was clearly the studio that Biograph had built in 1913 at 807 East 175th Street in the Bronx, intended as a new home for its star director, D. W. Griffith. Although Griffith defected before the paint was dry, the Bronx Biograph would remain one of New York's key rental studios for the next fifty years. When the Biograph Company suspended production in 1916, Lewis Selznick took over the studio, making a portion of his own films there while renting out the remaining space to all comers. By that time, the studio consisted of three interconnected buildings: an administration bloc, a laboratory, and a multilevel studio structure. "Each of these buildings has a permanent, imposing appearance which suggests a public library or State House rather than the temporary shack which too often shelters the film workers," the *New York Dramatic Mirror* wrote in 1917. Workshops and storerooms took up the ground floor, with an 80 × 120-foot "artificial light" studio on the floor above, capable of accommodating five companies working simultaneously. A "skylight studio" of similar size occupied the roof. The air was cooled by an ice machine, and Fresnel glass in the arched roof was said to eliminate shadows by diffusing the direct rays of the sun. Situated between



the studios were the dressing rooms and dining facilities, intended for a company of five hundred.<sup>96</sup>

Selznick made films here with Norma Talmadge and Clara Kimball Young, but also rented space to “Fatty” Arbuckle and Buster Keaton for the production of Comicque two-reelers (including *His Wedding Night* and *Oh, Doctor*, both 1917). Independent producer Mark Dintenfass made *My Four Years in Germany* there for Warner Bros. in 1918. Fox, Metro, and Famous Players also leased space from time to time, and Mae Murray worked here after leaving Tilford.<sup>97</sup> Marguerite Clark made her last film (*Scrambled Wives*) at Biograph in 1921, and in 1922 Harry Rapf began working there on a series of features released by Warners.<sup>98</sup> The even more significant Biograph films of Richard Barthelmess (*Tol’able David*, 1921), George Arliss (*The Green Goddess*, 1923), First National, and William Randolph Hearst will be discussed in detail later.

### Goldwyn

Universal produced relatively few films at the giant Fort Lee studio it opened in 1915, using the facility mainly as a laboratory and distribution depot and leasing the stages to local producers. The first major tenant was the new Goldwyn Pictures Corporation, which spent its first year in Fort Lee (1917–1918) before relocating to the old Triangle lot in Culver City (the studio that would later be home to MGM).<sup>99</sup> In the summer of 1919, however, Goldwyn reorganized and announced the construction of a new studio in the East “as large, if not larger, than the mammoth Culver City plant.”<sup>100</sup> By November, Goldwyn was shooting *Partners of the Night* at the Biograph studio, and soon both its top stars, Mabel Normand and Madge Kennedy, were making films in New York again.

Samuel Goldwyn had pursued a long and fruitless love affair with Mabel Normand, but their relationship, along with her career, was collapsing under the strain of her cocaine habit. According to biographer Scott Berg, Goldwyn brought her to New York in a final salvage effort, putting *The Slim Princess* (1920) into production at the Biograph studio at 203 West 146th Street, where she would be away from the temptations of Hollywood and he could keep a closer eye on her.<sup>101</sup> Two more Normand vehicles, *What Happened to Rosa* and *Head Over Heels*, quickly followed, all of them made by one of the studio’s finest directors, Victor Schertzinger. But *Head Over Heels*, which finished shooting on August 3, 1920, proved almost unreleasable and sat on the shelf for nearly two years. It was Normand’s last film for Goldwyn, who sold her contract back to the one producer who was even more obsessed with her than he was, Mack Sennett.

When he returned to New York after the war, Goldwyn had resisted settling into one permanent studio (as he had done in Fort Lee) and followed the Selznick

model of picking up space wherever it was available. Already working at Biograph as well as Erboglyph, Goldwyn took space at the Oliver studio on East 48th Street for Madge Kennedy's *Help Yourself* (1920).<sup>102</sup> By the summer of 1920 the Oliver was being referred to as Goldwyn's "regular" studio, but he needed still more space for *The Highest Bidder* and found it at the Spitz studio on East 124th Street.<sup>103</sup> The scattering of a relatively small amount of production all over the metropolitan area, especially when the Culver City studio had plenty of empty stage space, suggests that Goldwyn's return to New York was a somewhat hasty and disorganized operation. Although one 1919 article claimed that the company planned an eastern studio even larger than its Culver City facility, no such project ever materialized. And the reason given for the return to New York—that all of Goldwyn's "eminent authors" lived in the East—seems equally bogus.<sup>104</sup> Goldwyn also appears to have had some problems acquiring suitable technical personnel. Although Mabel Normand worked only with Schertzing, who had come from the West Coast with her, Madge Kennedy's East Coast films were directed by an assortment of New York directors, including Hugo Ballin (*Help Yourself*), Larry Windom (*The Truth* and *The Girl with a Jazz Heart*), and Wallace Worsley (*The Highest Bidder*). In any case, Goldwyn himself was hardly satisfied with the results, as Josef von Sternberg recalled in his autobiography.

When I was an assistant director I worked for Mr. Goldwyn, who, one fine day, looked at a film he had initiated. In the silence that followed the presentation, his crisp voice was heard. "Who directed this film?" A man, [Larry] Windom, stood up. "Who wrote the scenario?" Another arose. "Who was the cameraman?" A third staggered to his feet. "Who was the assistant?" It was my turn now to face him. "Who assembled and cut this junk?" I pointed to my chest. "Who put these actors in there?" Another jumped up. "You're all off the payroll," Mr. Goldwyn said in disgust as he left the room. Had his acumen been as great as he believed it to be, he would have discharged several others also, including himself.<sup>105</sup>

Avoiding the fate of Mabel Normand, Madge Kennedy did not see her career crash and burn after she made her final Goldwyn films that year in New York (including the film von Sternberg refers to). First she returned to the stage, creating the ingénue role in *Poppo* (1923) opposite W. C. Fields, the part that would be played by Carol Dempster in D. W. Griffith's film. Then she formed her own production company, Kenma, and shot two films for Paramount release at their Astoria studio (*The Purple Highway*, 1923, and *Three Miles Out*, 1924). Kennedy made four more silent films in New York for various independent producers, then remained off-screen until she returned as a character actress in the 1950s. She made her last appearance in a small role in John Schlesinger's *Day of the Locust* (1975).

As for Samuel Goldwyn, in one sense he did follow von Sternberg's advice to discharge himself. One month after the New York production experiment ended, Goldwyn was forced by his board of directors to tender his resignation as president of the Goldwyn Pictures Corporation.<sup>106</sup> Although the board soon reinstated him in a reduced capacity, he would be out of the company completely two years later. As a production entity, the Goldwyn Pictures Corporation never made another film in the East after the summer of 1920. But when he returned as an independent producer releasing through First National, Sam Goldwyn did shoot one of his first productions, the slapstick ethnic comedy *Potash and Perlmutter* (1923), in Fort Lee.<sup>107</sup>

Although the individual films Goldwyn made in New York at this time were relatively unimportant, the way in which they were made prefigures the style of production that would later come to characterize New York filmmaking. Indeed, even though filming on the studio's own back lot is one of the most characteristic elements of the so-called Hollywood studio system, the industry in New York almost never operated in this manner after 1932, preferring instead to rent its studio space.

### Inspiration Pictures and Distinctive Productions

Inspiration Pictures was probably the most important of the production companies operating in New York that chose to do without a conventional back lot. The company had been formed in 1921 by actor Richard Barthelmess, director Henry King, and New York attorney Charles H. Duell. Barthelmess had been making films in Fort Lee since 1916; he went to the West Coast in 1918 to work for Griffith and achieved his first great success playing opposite Lillian Gish in *Broken Blossoms*. When Griffith moved to Mamaroneck, Barthelmess scored again in *Way Down East*, making him such a valuable property that Griffith could no longer afford to keep him under contract. Barthelmess then starred in *Experience* (1921) for director George Fitzmaurice at the Famous Players–Lasky Long Island studio (with location shooting in Savannah, Georgia) before starting his first film for Inspiration, *Tol'able David* (1921).<sup>108</sup>

Joseph Hergesheimer's story of a country boy who proves his manhood through a series of horrendous physical and emotional struggles had been bought for Barthelmess by D. W. Griffith. But even though it belonged to a genre of rural melodrama just then nearing its peak of popularity and was set against a bucolic back-country landscape, *Tol'able David* was not really Griffith's cup of tea. The story offered no substantial roles for the Gish sisters or Carol Dempster, and the action is driven entirely by masculine conflict, not a typical Griffith situation. Without much to do in Mamaroneck, Barthelmess developed the project himself, eventually

bringing in British actor and playwright Edmund Gouling to write a screenplay. When Barthelmess left Griffith to form Inspiration, he took the Hergesheimer property with him.<sup>109</sup>

Charles Duell had arranged for distribution through First National, offering the attractive package of Barthelmess as star and Henry King, a successful West Coast director, as the new company's creative head. "We were given \$250,000 to make *Tol'able David* with," King remembered:

I had to assume all the responsibility for costs, so I limited salaries. This was the early Twenties, there was not much money around and actors were out of work. I cast most of the small parts at the Lamb's Club. I'd pay them \$35 a week plus expenses while on location. It was much better than sitting in New York all summer doing nothing, so everyone looked at it from a perfectly sensible point of view. Thirty-five dollars then was pretty good money.<sup>110</sup>

King brought in the film for only \$86,000 and pocketed his share of the difference as one of the partners. Later he boasted that of the five Barthelmess films he made for Inspiration, only one cost more than \$100,000. In retrospect, it might have been better if he had spent a bit more of the allotted budgets: all during this period Barthelmess's films would be unfavorably compared with the more lavish product released by his Hollywood rivals.<sup>111</sup>

Instead of filming in Pennsylvania, as Duell had hoped, King took his New York crew to Staunton, Virginia, and shot most of the picture less than eight miles from where he had grown up. Here he rewrote the script, introducing episodes from his own childhood, then returned to New York, where interiors and postproduction were completed at the Biograph studio.<sup>112</sup> *Tol'able David* emerged as one of King's finest and most personal films, a classic whose seamless integration of action and location had a great influence on the Soviet director V. I. Pudovkin. "I met D. W. Griffith only once," King remembered. "That was after the screening of *Tol'able David*, and Richard Barthelmess—the leading man of *Tol'able David*, who'd starred in a lot of Griffith films—took me to meet him. 'Too good, dear boy,' he said. 'Too good. Too good.'" <sup>113</sup>

But as King himself later admitted to Kevin Brownlow, "None of the other five pictures that I did with Dick Barthelmess ever compared with *Tol'able David*."<sup>114</sup> Actually there were four more: *The Seventh Day* (1922), filmed on location in Maine, about a yacht full of blasé New Yorkers stranded for repairs in a New England fishing village; *Sonny* (1922), a tale of look-alikes who go to war, with the poor boy returning to take the place of his rich buddy; *The Bond Boy* (1922), a family melodrama; and *Fury* (1923), filmed in Gloucester, Massachusetts, and along the Atlantic Coast aboard the *Nearis*, a square-rigged sailing vessel previously used to transport

Chilean guano (it required three separate fumigations).<sup>115</sup> These films were all produced at the Biograph studio and drew on the same tightly knit production unit. They were shot by either Henry Cronjager or Roy Overbaugh; Duncan Mansfield was the editor; and production design, when credited, was the work of Charles Seessel or Robert Haas. After completing *Fury*, King took Haas and Overbaugh with him to Italy, where they made *The White Sister* (1923) and *Romola* (1925) with Inspiration's newest star, Lillian Gish.

The cost of *The White Sister*, though not excessive by Hollywood standards, was triple what King had been spending on the Barthelmess films.<sup>116</sup> Consequently, back in New York, the budgets for Inspiration's original star also had to grow a bit. Working with a new director-cameraman team of John Robertson and George Folsay, Barthelmess made two costume pictures of his own, *The Bright Shawl* (1923), a tale of the Cuban revolution, and *The Fighting Blade* (1923), in which he played a Flemish soldier of fortune in Cromwell's England. The art director for both films was Everett Shinn, already famous as a key member of New York's "Ash Can school" of poetic realists and a veteran of the old Goldwyn studio in Fort Lee.<sup>117</sup> Shinn was assisted on *The Fighting Blade* by Wiard Ihnen, who had earlier been associated with the Tilford Cinema Studio.<sup>118</sup>

Barthelmess continued to film his Inspiration productions in the East through the end of 1925, using whatever studio facilities were available. *The Fighting Blade* and *The Enchanted Cottage* (1924) were shot at the "Inspiration Studios" in Fort Lee, actually the old Universal studio. The cottage and adjacent gardens of Sir Arthur Wing Pinero's stark fantasy were built entirely inside this old greenhouse, allowing

Richard Barthelmess made most of his independent Inspiration productions in the East, including *The Fighting Blade*, shot in Fort Lee in 1923. Museum of Modern Art/Film Stills Archive.



director John Robertson to rehearse for two full weeks while a New Jersey winter raged outdoors. "In the East," Barthelmess said, "there are many fine studio facilities, and any picture demanding only interiors can be made as well in Fort Lee as in Hollywood. Of course, when it comes to outdoor shots, California, with its sunshine, is more suitable than New Jersey."<sup>119</sup> In addition to Barthelmess, the Fort Lee Universal studio also attracted the notorious beauty Barbara La Marr, who appeared in two First National pictures there in 1925, *Heart of a Siren* and *The White Monkey*. And Universal itself produced *The Little Giant* in Fort Lee in 1926, the last complete feature it would make in the East for many years.<sup>120</sup>

Whatever their advantages, the studios in New Jersey were not getting any younger. Barthelmess abandoned Fort Lee after *The Enchanted Cottage*, moving his operations to the more modern Tec-Art studio in Manhattan. His first film there was *Classmates* (1924), a West Point story adapted from an old William de Mille stage play. Many of the exteriors were shot at the military academy, mainly scenes of drills and parades, but also a few romantic bits at Flirtation Walk and the Kissing Rock. An additional three weeks were spent in the Florida Everglades, which doubled for the Amazon. Here the company was harassed by heat and mosquitoes to such an extent that Roy Overbaugh, just back from Italy, fell victim to an ear infection that the crew attributed to "swamp poison." Before the age of antibiotics, such an infection could be fatal, and Overbaugh spent weeks recovering in a Miami hospital. Stories like this, which were included in the film's official publicity kit, were hardly calculated to improve Florida's position as a rival East Coast production center.<sup>121</sup>

The most unusual of Barthelmess's Tec-Art films was certainly *Soul-Fire* (1925), an attempt to illustrate the creative process behind a young composer's dramatic concerto, told through a series of elaborate flashbacks. Everett Shinn designed the film, and Carlotta Monterey, then married to Eugene O'Neill, appeared in a small supporting role (her only other film appearance was made the same year, at the Paramount Astoria studio, in *The King on Main Street*). *Shore Leave* (1925) was based on the same material as the later Fred Astaire–Ginger Rogers musical *Follow the Fleet* (1936), with Barthelmess in the Randolph Scott role. *The Beautiful City* (1926) was "a dramatization of [author Edmund] Goulding's first impressions of New York. . . . It is Mr. Goulding's visualization of America as a land of unlimited opportunity both for material and mental development."<sup>122</sup> An otherwise conventional tale of New York's immigrant underworld, the film featured Dorothy Gish and William Powell, and ended with an apotheosis of the city as shot from a ferry cruising the waterfront.

Barthelmess may have loved working in New York, but problems within Inspiration Pictures eventually drove him to the West Coast. In early 1926 he signed a new agreement to work directly for First National.<sup>123</sup> After playing out his contract with Inspiration, he moved his production company to First National's large studio in Burbank, where he revived his career with the sensational success of *The Patent*



*Leather Kid* (1927). During the first year of the Academy Awards, Barthelmess was nominated as best actor for his role in this film and in his subsequent First National production, *The Noose* (1928). He lost to Emil Jannings, but his impact in these two films, and his successful transition to talkies, quickly overshadowed just about everything he had done since *Tol'able David*.

Barthelmess's experience with Inspiration Pictures was mirrored to a certain degree by that of George Arliss, who made half a dozen silent films in the East. His first was *The Devil* (1921), an adaptation of his initial stage success, which he made for Pathé at a rented studio in Fort Lee.<sup>124</sup> Director James Young had assembled an excellent technical team, with Harry Fischbeck behind the camera and Clark Robinson and Charles O. Seesel responsible for architecture and decoration. Robinson and Seesel had worked on *The Copperhead* the year before, and the local trade papers were again filled with accounts of their radical approach to production design. Some sets were built in diminishing perspective; others were designed with four walls and a ceiling, creating a lighting problem that Fischbeck described as the "most difficult" he had ever encountered. For two particularly elaborate sets, special artwork was created by Frederick E. Triebel, described as the only American member of the Royal Academy.<sup>125</sup>

After completing *The Devil*, a one-picture deal promoted by a team of independent producers, Arliss accepted an offer to set up a production unit similar to the one Barthelmess had created. He became the chief asset of Distinctive Productions and made the rest of his silent films in New York.<sup>126</sup> These included *Disraeli* (1921), *The Man Who Played God* (1922), and *The Green Goddess* (1923, cited as the fifth best film of the year in a poll of national critics conducted by *The Film Daily*).<sup>127</sup> Although he left Young behind, Arliss was careful to use Fischbeck, Seesel, and, later, Robinson on all these pictures. Arliss was an attractive property, and Distinctive's films were the first outside product distributed by United Artists (although by 1923 they switched to Goldwyn-Cosmopolitan, a combination created by William Randolph Hearst).<sup>128</sup> At that point Distinctive also began making some films with less prominent theatrical celebrities, notably Alfred Lunt's first three films (in one of which, *Second Youth* [1924], he appeared with Lynne Fontanne) and *The Rejected Woman* (1924) with Conrad Nagel and Bela Lugosi (billed as "the Hungarian Barrymore").<sup>129</sup>

Arliss became an even greater screen star in the talkie era by remaking nearly all of his silent pictures. Just like Lionel Barrymore, he obliterated his early New York films in his autobiography and implied that the first film he made was the Warners 1929 remake of *Disraeli*.<sup>130</sup> It is hardly surprising, then, that when books like those by Barrymore and Arliss began appearing in the 1940s and 1950s, even people who should have known better came to believe that there really was no significant film production in New York during the 1920s.

### “Studio for Rent”

Despite the sudden closing of Paramount’s new Astoria studio “for renovations” in December 1920, a survey of East Coast production published in the Christmas issue of *Camera!* shows an apparently healthy occupancy rate for the many smaller studios in the New York area. At the Bronx Biograph studio, Raoul Walsh was directing Miriam Cooper in *The Oath*, while Billy Bitzer was photographing Lillian Gish for a Jerome Storm film (never completed). Five features and one serial were in production at Fox, where Pearl White and George Walsh were the resident stars. At Mamaroneck, Victor Heerman was directing a Dorothy Gish comedy, and Griffith had begun work on *Orphans of the Storm*. Léonce Perret was in New Jersey filming *The Money Maniac* at the Ideal studio, his last American film before returning to France. Albert Capellani and Robert Vignola were both working at Hearst’s new Cosmopolitan studio. Hugo Ballin was directing *East Lynne* at the Harry Levey studio, where several sponsored films were also in production. An unnamed “all star drama” was in production at the Lincoln studio under the direction of John L. McCutcheon. At the Metro studio, George D. Baker was directing Anna Q. Nilsson in *Without Limit*, a Sawyer-Lubin production, and Maxwell Karger was completing Metro’s own *A Message from Mars*. Emile Chautard was filming *The Black Panther’s Cub* at the Peerless. Selznick had four features in production at the Paragon and another in preparation. At the Talmadge studio, Norma was completing *The Passion Flower* and preparing *Playing the Game*, while Chet Withey was directing Constance on the other stage. Two independent features were being made at the ancient Victor studio on West 43rd Street. And even the fast-fading Vitagraph had four films in production in Brooklyn, two of them starring Alice Joyce and Corinne Griffith. All of this activity was occurring in the winter, always a slack season in the East, and in the face of a general film industry slump.<sup>131</sup>

The problem lay in who was making these films. Many were speculative productions shot by independent producers, and some would sit on the shelf for a very long time before finding distribution—if ever. Except for Griffith and Hearst, all of the major producers then working in the East also operated studios in California, and the winter of 1918 had shown which location most producers preferred. New York clearly had a well-developed studio infrastructure, but the tenants could all vanish overnight. The owners and operators of these studios would soon come to understand that they were now doing business in a buyer’s market. It would not be enough to scare up some more customers. What they needed was a new kind of customer, making films in a new way and distributing films to a new audience. It would take a long time, but when the studio system in Hollywood suffered a near-fatal collapse after World War II, it was the model developed in New York that offered the solution.

Unlike the stable “brick and mortar” business typically associated with the classical studio era, this new studio system depended entirely on a transient tenancy. Long-term affiliations with specific producers were rare. Filmmakers would come and go, picking up their technical crews “at The Beach,” and making whatever deals they could for sets, costumes, and technical equipment. For example, the old Biograph studio at 11 East 14th Street was taken over by composer Adolf Philipp, who produced a series of two-reel “musicals” there in 1919, including *The Midnight Girl*, *Oh, Louise*, and *My Girl Suzanne*. “Each picture starts with the words and music, and an introduction of the stars, and then fades into the film story,” a stylistic bridge between illustrated lantern slides and the later musical “soundies.”<sup>132</sup> The following year George Irving directed Mollie King in a low-budget feature called *Her Majesty*, but the 14th Street studio, which had been abandoned by Biograph as far back as 1913, was clearly too small to be practical.<sup>133</sup>

During this period Pathé operated several studios in the New York–New Jersey area, the most famous of which was built in 1910 on the heights overlooking Jersey City. When Pathé gradually abandoned production to focus on distribution, the American arm reorganized as Pathé Exchange, Inc. and took over a new studio at 1990 Park Avenue, close by the Harlem River on the corner of 134th Street. Once a notorious fight club known as Young’s Casino (and “haunt of the plotters in the Rosenthal murder”), it had been converted into a studio by Saenger Picture Plays Corporation in 1917. The 134th Street studio was soon occupied by various producers affiliated with the Pathé organization, including Léonce Perret and George B. Seitz. Seitz would shoot many of his best-known serials here, including *The Phantom Foe* (1920), *Hurricane Hutch* (1921), and *Velvet Fingers* (1922).<sup>134</sup>

Frank Leon Smith, who worked with Seitz on many of these films, remembered the 134th Street operation as the last of the atelier studios, where “anybody with a good idea could get it on the screen.” According to Smith, “the place was more like a boys’ club than a studio, and Seitz wanted everyone to prosper. He started a minimum wage scale, probably the first in the industry, and operated two free dining rooms. He gave \$100 to each grinning new father. He subsidized a biblical historian to develop material for a serial on the life of Christ.”<sup>135</sup> But Seitz lost a great deal of money on *Rogues and Romance* (1920), a dramatic feature in which he co-starred with June Caprice. Much of the film had been shot in Spain, with additional exterior sets constructed in Larchmont. Its failure, and the general decline in the serial market, forced Seitz into the low-budget sector. In 1922 he directed *Plunder*, the last of the Pearl White serials, “which centered around treasure buried long ago in ground now covered by a Wall Street skyscraper,” an apt metaphor for the loss of Seitz’s own golden age. After Seitz left, the studio was occasionally rented to tenants like William Randolph Hearst, who shot part of *Little Old New York* there when his own studio burned in 1923. Ironically, an even more disastrous fire swept through the

134th Street studio in 1929, a tragedy that would have significant consequences for the development of the motion picture industry in New York during the early years of sound.

Production in Fort Lee had never fully recovered from the postwar slump. The transportation problems that had discouraged people like Zukor were still there (the George Washington Bridge would not open until 1931), and improvements in lighting technique transformed the giant greenhouse studios into architectural liabilities. For a time Selznick was able to take advantage of this neglect (at one point he controlled 60 percent of Fort Lee's stage space), but he was gone by the end of 1921. Alice and Herbert Blaché, who had expanded their Solax studio in 1917 and 1919, placed it on the rental market with disappointing results (a fire soon gutted the newly enlarged laboratory). Albert Capellani leased the property for a series of films, including *The Virtuous Model* and *Oh, Boy!* (1919), the latter an ambitious attempt to film the Jerome Kern–P. G. Wodehouse musical. But it appears that no films were shot there after 1920, although the laboratory operation was revived and continued to function for many years.<sup>136</sup>

The situation was hardly any better at the World Film Corporation's Peerless studio, where production had also fallen dramatically by 1918. Once home to William Brady and Maurice Tourneur, World had seen its talent roster raided by rivals. No longer competitive, the studio remained active with such interesting, if low-key, productions as Oscar Apfel's *Phil for Short* (1919), a curious screwball romance starring Evelyn Greeley. Before World finally went bankrupt in 1921, its Fort Lee stages were already being used by Famous Players–Lasky, Herman Jans, and Prizma.<sup>137</sup> *The Little Match Girl*, shot in the Prizmacolor process in 1919 (but not released for another two years), was said to have been "the first picture ever made in America where the entire photoplay has been photographed in natural colors."<sup>138</sup> More specifically, it may have been the first narrative film made in a subtractive natural color process (that is, with the color carried in the release prints, as in modern processes).

The Peerless studio was used for occasional low-budget productions, including Travers Vale's *The Pateboard Crown* (1921) and the Eddie Polo serial *Captain Kidd*, shot in 1922.<sup>139</sup> In 1925 it was reorganized as the Fort Lee Studios in an attempt "to again make Fort Lee an important production center."<sup>140</sup> A series of "Just Kids" comedies was in production the following year, along with two George Walsh features directed by Wesley Ruggles, *The Kick-Off* and *A Man of Quality*, but the studio would not come into its own again until the advent of sound.<sup>141</sup>

Once Selznick had gone, Jules Brulatour reclaimed the Fort Lee Paragon studio as the base of operations for his protégée, Hope Hampton (he had built it in 1916 for Maurice Tourneur). Brulatour formed Hope Hampton Productions and starred her in such films as *A Modern Salome* (1920), directed by Léonce Perret, and Clarence Brown's *The Light in the Dark* (1922), in which she played opposite Lon Chaney. The

relationship between Brulatour and Hampton would seem to be one of several unacknowledged sources for *Citizen Kane*, although their films clearly lacked the quality of those William Randolph Hearst was producing for Marion Davies.<sup>142</sup> John Gilbert, who wrote and directed *Love's Penalty* (1921) for Hampton, remembered it as “unbelievably horrible . . . ghastly . . . bewildering.”<sup>143</sup> The industry at large soon began referring to Brulatour’s star as “Hopeless Hampton.” After appearing in a handful of films for Famous Players–Lasky, Warner Bros., and Fox during 1923, Hampton permanently retired to Paragon, where Brulatour’s money helped finance her last five silent films. In *Fifty-Fifty* (1925) she was a Parisian model who doubled as an apache dancer by night, married Lionel Barrymore, and successfully kept him away from Louise Glaum. In *The Unfair Sex* (1926) her competition was Nita Naldi, the all-purpose “other woman” of the East Coast motion picture industry.

Henri Diamant-Berger was running the studio for Hampton and Brulatour by 1925, and for a time it was even renamed the Diamant Film Company. That summer he directed the first all-Technicolor short, *Marionettes*, an elaborate two-reeler released by Educational Pictures.<sup>144</sup> The studio’s archaic technical facilities were described in one local paper as “particularly adapted to the production of day-light pictures, the roof being of glass. This is now possibly the only studio of this type left in the [Fort Lee] borough, the rest having converted to artificial light studios.”<sup>145</sup> Among the few non-Hampton features produced at Paragon were Oscar Lund’s *Love’s*

The Pathé serial *Into the Net* (1924) was one of the last films made at the Paragon studio in Fort Lee, although many of its best action sequences were shot on the streets of New York. Here Jack Mulhall resists being thrown off the Brooklyn Bridge, while directors George B. Seitz and Spencer Bennet (holding the script) flank his co-star, Edna Murphy. Kevin Brownlow collection.





*Old Sweet Song* (1923), with Louis Wolheim, and Joseph Henabery's *The Pinch Hitter* (1925), starring Glenn Hunter and Constance Bennett, a baseball film for which location scenes were shot in New Brunswick on the Rutgers College baseball field.<sup>146</sup> One of the last great East Coast serials, *Into the Net*, was shot here by George B. Seitz in 1924. The Paragon studio ended its days as a warehouse and burned to the ground in 1952.

The sheer number of rental studios in and around New York meant that top producers (Goldwyn), mid-level operators (Whitman Bennett), and low-budget bottom feeders could all find their needs met somewhere in the local community. Herman Jans was typical of the low-budget group, producing (and releasing) his films in batches as financing and distribution deals became available. Originally involved in distribution and exhibition (he operated a successful motion picture theater in Newark), Jans moved into the Peerless studio in Fort Lee in 1920 and quickly produced four features, including *Madonnas and Men*, a low-budget imitation of *Intolerance* that juxtaposed ancient Roman excesses with those of the modern era. "No civilization is permanent which is founded on the debasing of women," a title reminds us, before flashing forward to a series of Jazz Age revels designed to put Rome's orgies to shame.<sup>147</sup> Jans would move from studio to studio as economics dictated, sometimes partnering with other local entrepreneurs, including B. A. Rolfe and E. H. Fischer (who owned the old Thanhouser studio in New Rochelle). As film historian William K. Everson noted, Jans was very good at making sure that every dollar in the budget was visible on the screen.<sup>148</sup> To economize, he would cast minor celebrities who could be hired inexpensively for an occasional film, established screen names whose popularity was waning, or eager young talent willing to work for peanuts. For example, *The Mad Dancer* (1925) featured Follies star Ann Pennington, while *Married?* (1926) teamed up-and-coming Constance Bennett with over-the-hill Owen Moore.

Jans occasionally had problems completing his films and getting them into distribution, but most of them appear to have been released. Other independent operators were not so lucky; they may have raised the cash to launch a new production, but frequently failed to bring the project to completion. The reasons could be anything from criminal fraud to unpaid laboratory bills to lack of distributor interest. Some films that are known to have been produced simply vanished without a trace. Perhaps this is what happened to the 1921 Marx Brothers film known as *Humor Risk*. On April 8, 1921, it was reported in the trade papers that the Four Marx Brothers would make a series of two-reelers for a New York producer named Caravel Comedies.<sup>149</sup> Only a week later, *Moving Picture World* reported that the first film, *Humor Risk*, had been completed, directed by Dick Smith from a script by Jo Swerling, later one of Frank Capra's most important collaborators.<sup>150</sup> Ten years later Groucho claimed that the film was test-marketed to a Saturday matinee children's audience in





Al Joy (at right) was one of the few comedians to appear in a series of silent two-reel comedies in New York. In this rare production shot from around 1926, he seems uncharacteristically somber. His cinematographer uses the inexpensive Willart camera, a favorite of low-budget producers. Museum of the Moving Image.

the Bronx. The (predictable?) negative response supposedly convinced all involved to abandon the project.<sup>151</sup>

No silent Marx Brothers film was ever released; but if the series had gone ahead, the brothers would have had their choice of a dozen or more rental studios within an easy commute of Times Square. Groucho's later recollection that the brothers traveled to Weehawken to shoot this film suggests it may have been made at the Ideal studio in Hudson Heights once used by Herbert Brenon.<sup>152</sup> In 1919 Ideal had been leased for a series of Paramount-Briggs comedies under the direction of William Kellette, and it was sporadically active in the short-comedy field into the 1930s. Deck Richards made Maglin comedies at the Ideal in 1925, and Al Joy did the same for Ricardo Films the following year.<sup>153</sup> A less likely possibility would have been the Lincoln studio on Bergen Boulevard in Grantwood. Built in 1915, it was more valuable as a laboratory operation, although a few films, including the original *Leather Pushers* series (1926), were also shot there.<sup>154</sup>

Independent film production was very sensitive to the industry's unpredictable business cycles, but for a time there was still enough activity to suggest that a new rental studio complex might be a reasonable investment opportunity. Of the many such schemes put forward during the 1918–1923 period, one of the most elaborate was the “New York Motion Picture Studios” proposal floated by the Maurice Holding Company in Queens. The 72.5-acre Maurice tract was the largest single undeveloped property within four miles of Grand Central. The owners proposed a large studio complex as an anchor, to be built at the intersection of Maurice Avenue and Borden Avenue in Maspeth. “The present plan is to offer these facilities to producers generally and not have the plant limited to the productions of any single manufacturer,” they announced. The prospectus even promised “to afford an opportunity to the public to view the production of pictures at a point sufficiently near the center of New York City to be easily accessible.”<sup>155</sup> Despite an impressive plan drawn up by the firm of Carrère and Hastings, architects of the New York Public Library, the scheme went nowhere.

The same fate befell the so-called Municipal studios, proposed for Long Island City in 1920–1921. Although director Raoul Walsh was listed as a vice president, the operation went bankrupt before he or anyone else ever made a film there.<sup>156</sup> Walsh, who had directed many films in the East for William Fox, seemed for a time a potential anchor of postwar New York production. His “sumptuous production” of *The Oath*, in which his wife, Miriam Cooper, co-starred with Anna Q. Nilsson and Conway Tearle, sprawled across three local studios—Biograph, Solax, and Paragon.<sup>157</sup> But after the Municipal studios scheme collapsed, Walsh moved permanently to Hollywood.

In October 1920 the *Exhibitors Trade Review* reported that “powerful money interests” would invest \$10 million in “an Eastern Universal City in Long Island,” that is, a lavish rental facility with thirty-six stages and its own laboratory.<sup>158</sup> Nothing came of this, either. The last serious effort to build such a studio occurred in 1923, when Arthur S. Friend of Distinctive Pictures promoted a large rental studio on the site of the old Windmuller estate in Woodside. The facility would have contained nine stages and was said to be supported by representatives of First National, Goldwyn, and Inspiration, as well as Distinctive. But despite the backing of the borough president, the project was torpedoed when residents of Woodside and Newton managed to stall it at local Board of Estimate hearings.<sup>159</sup> Each of these proposed studios was located in Queens, near one of the new subway lines that had recently been built across the borough's miles of farmland and undeveloped acreage. But it would take more than cheap land and transportation to spur the creation of a giant new rental studio. Without a guaranteed supply of customers, no developer was interested in building a speculative “Universal City” from scratch, so local producers continued to patronize existing facilities.

### Oscar Micheaux and Race Movies

During this period many marginal operators sold their films territory-by-territory through the states rights market, the distribution vehicle of choice for the lowest-budget producers on both coasts. But the situation of even these “poverty row” independents (as the Hollywood contingent was called) was considerably more stable than that of the race movie producers. The potential market for these firms, which produced and distributed “all black” films for African American audiences, was limited to a few hundred segregated theaters scattered across the southern states and industrial ghettos of the North.<sup>160</sup>

African Americans had been on the screen since the 1890s, but their appearances for such producers as Edison, Biograph, or Vitagraph typically reflected the racist stereotypes of nineteenth-century popular culture. In 1912, for example, Solax produced *A Fool and His Money* at its Flushing studio, relying on crudely conventionalized black character types for simple comic effect. “The story is a satiric comedy dealing with the pretensions of colored folks,” the company announced to the trade. “The way they try to ape and imitate their white brothers forms the basis of the story.”<sup>161</sup> *A Fool and His Money* would appear to have been no more or less offensive than other comedies of its kind, and the film did feature real black vaudevillians, including “Cakewalk King” James Russell, instead of white actors in blackface. It could also be argued that the early cinema depended on the use of such stereotypes to ensure narrative intelligibility and that other groups were caricatured in similar fashion. But whereas Irishmen and Jews soon took important roles in the American motion picture industry, and Italian filmmakers were lauded for the artistic qualities of their new epic cinema, African Americans remained outsiders, their on-screen image entirely the creation of others.

The neglect of this portion of the audience by mainstream producers, a ready exhibition outlet in the segregated theaters, and a thriving African American theatrical tradition all suggested a potential new niche market: films produced not for general exhibition but targeted to the otherwise unrepresented black audience. The first producer to identify this market, the Foster Photoplay Company, was established in Chicago by William Foster in 1910. The short films he produced, including *The Railroad Porter* (1912) and *The Fall Guy* (1913), were sold directly to theaters patronized mainly by African American audiences. Yet, despite the ready audience, the limited size of this market would hobble “race movie” production for the next fifty years.<sup>162</sup>

Although Chicago was the cradle of the race movie industry, activity there seems to have ceased by 1920, when the most ambitious local producer, Oscar Micheaux, relocated to New York.<sup>163</sup> A tireless entrepreneur whose background included publishing books, homesteading in South Dakota, and working as a Pullman porter,

Micheaux turned to filmmaking in 1918. Unable to convince the Lincoln Motion Picture Company, a West Coast race movie producer, that his autobiographical novel *The Homesteader* deserved to be produced as a full-length feature, Micheaux decided to film it himself. He followed with *Within Our Gates*, a harrowing drama of lynching and racial strife produced in the aftermath of Chicago's July 1919 race riots.<sup>164</sup>

Micheaux was in New York by 1920, but he was not the first local race film producer. The Frederick Douglass Film Company, operating out of Jersey City, had made *The Colored American Winning His Suit* as early as 1916 and *The Scapegoat*, from a story by Harlem Renaissance novelist Paul Lawrence Dunbar, the following year.<sup>165</sup> But while the Douglass Company, like most of the early race film producers, lasted only a few seasons, Micheaux flourished in New York. On his death in 1951, the *Amsterdam News* credited him with the direction of forty-four films, more than half the total number of race films ever produced.<sup>166</sup>

Information on the production of Micheaux's films is scattered and contradictory. He would raise capital around the country from individual theater owners, then return to New York and shoot until the money ran out. Like many low-budget filmmakers then and now, Micheaux incorporated exteriors as often as possible, taking advantage of the inexpensive realism afforded by familiar locations. The *New York Age* called *The Devil's Disciple* (1925) "the first story of Negro night life in Harlem ever brought to the screen. Every scene is taken in the locality and every one will recognize the landmarks that are familiar to us."<sup>167</sup> When funds ran short, homes of family and friends were pressed into service. Occasionally local investors and their home towns would also be incorporated into a production: a fund-raising trip to Baltimore resulted in a pair of local businessmen making cameo appearances in *The Spider's Web* (1927), for example.<sup>168</sup>

Micheaux also rented various studios during this period, but exact locations are hard to establish. We know that *Symbol of the Unconquered* (1920) was shot in Fort Lee because a recognizable group of local tourist cabins stood in for the "wild West" settlers' cabins called for in the script.<sup>169</sup> Interiors appear to have been done at the nearby Champion studio, which is briefly seen as the "barn" from which the heroine flees in the opening reels. In the summer of 1921 the fan magazine *Movie Weekly* told its surprised readers ("No company with which most of 'us fans' are familiar releases these pictures") that Micheaux's "colored motion picture company" had been making films at one of the Fort Lee studios "for the past few years."<sup>170</sup> As rental studios in Manhattan began to take business away from the obsolete Fort Lee stages, Micheaux eventually needed to go no farther afield than the Estee studio at 361 West 125th Street, where he shot *Deceit* in 1921.<sup>171</sup>

Micheaux produced a number of tough urban crime films, including *The Brute* (1920), *The Gunsaulus Mystery* (inspired by the Leo Frank case, 1921), and *The Dungeon* (1922), whose underworld of gamblers, dance halls, and crooked politicians

often ran afoul of the powerful state censorship boards. But from the beginning, he was best known for a string of social problem films specifically targeted to the concerns of his audience: passing, miscegenation, racial violence, and the politics of skin color were common themes. Unfortunately, such films also brought down the wrath of the censors. *Within Our Gates* and *Symbol of the Unconquered* (with its villainous night riders and intimations of miscegenation) were especially problematic. Micheaux, whose films have often been seen as autobiographical, responded with *Deceit*, a direct attack on the institution of motion picture censorship; it took two years before he was able to release it. Yet despite pressure from institutional censors (and growing complaints from the black press), Micheaux continued to address such issues. In 1924 he produced *Body and Soul*, an attack on hypocritical “jack-leg” preachers (seen as drunken, whoring charlatans) and the flocks they so easily dupe. To play the lead, Paul Robeson received \$100 per week for the three-week shoot, with a promise of 3 percent of the gross after the first \$40,000 in receipts.<sup>172</sup> The implied attack on the ministry, one of the most serious infractions for silent-era censors, resulted in an immediate demand from the New York State Censorship Commission that Micheaux reshoot and re-edit the film. He turned the bulk of *Body and Soul* into a dream.<sup>173</sup>

Robeson had already earned a crossover reputation in the New York theater with his interpretation of the leading role in Eugene O’Neill’s *The Emperor Jones*, and he was by far the most important actor ever to work for Micheaux. More typically, Micheaux made use of an informal stock company moonlighting from the black vaudeville circuit or the Harlem theater, although a few favorites, like Evelyn Preer and Shingzie Howard, he discovered on his own. Later ethnic film producers would follow the same strategy, raiding New York’s Yiddish, Italian, or Ukrainian theater companies for potential screen stars.

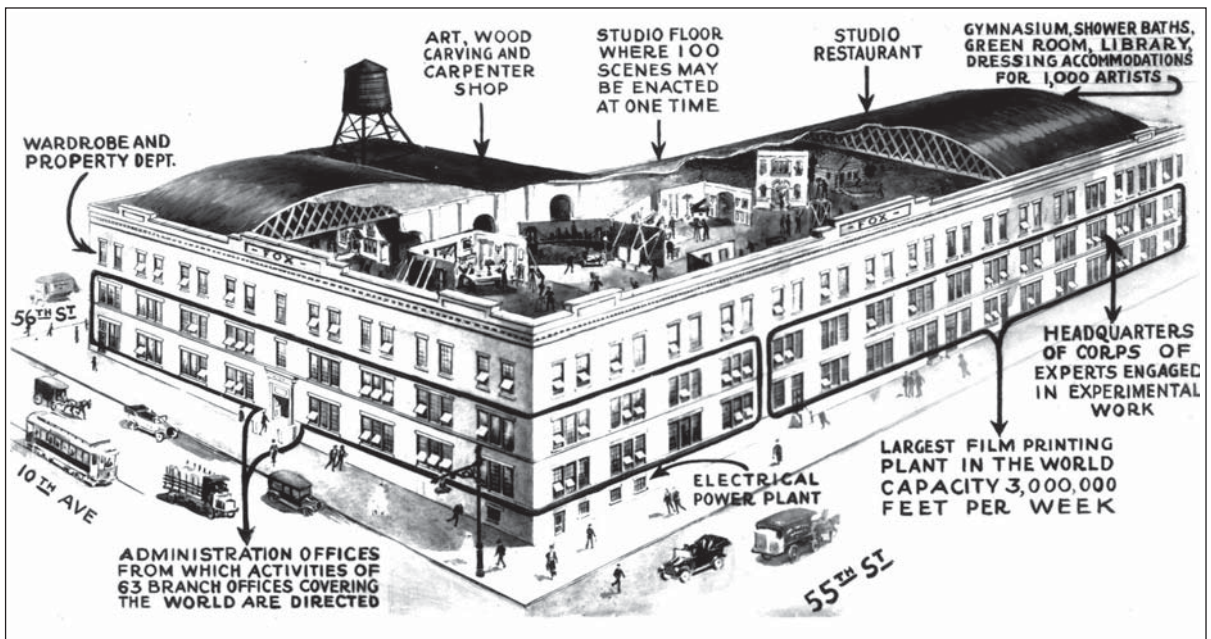
Indeed, not long after Micheaux arrived in New York, he was faced with his most significant local competitor when Harlem’s Lafayette Players began a series of films for the Reol Motion Picture Company.<sup>174</sup> Their first film, *The Sport of the Gods* (1921), was an ambitious Paul Lawrence Dunbar adaptation shot at the “Tolden studio” in the Bronx.<sup>175</sup> Although Reol was backed by a white entrepreneur, Robert J. Levy, the company appears to have been no less daring than Micheaux in its handling of racial issues, as can be seen in *The Burden of Race* (1921) and *The Call of His People* (1922). The hero of *Spitfire* (1922), one of Reol’s last films, directly invokes the social theories of Booker T. Washington, also an influence on Micheaux.<sup>176</sup>

In the mainstream cinema, New York production was already identified as more intellectual, more likely to be drawn from literary and theatrical sources, and less likely to emphasize action or comedy. The sober tone of the films from Reol, Micheaux, and even the short-lived Frederick Douglass Company suggest that this same distinction was present in the race film market, where comedies, Westerns, and action pictures were far more likely to be produced in Texas, Florida, or California.

Once Micheaux fought off the challenge from Reol, he found few other local rivals. In 1922 heavyweight champion Jack Johnson appeared for Blackburn Velde Productions in *For His Mother's Sake*, shot at the Leah Baird studio in Cliffside Park. Another arrival from Chicago, Peter P. Jones (recently head of the stills department at Selznick's Fort Lee studios), had entered the film processing business in New Jersey and in 1923 became involved with a two-reel Arthur Moss and Edward Fry comedy, *How High Is Up?* shot at the old Lincoln studio in Grantwood.<sup>177</sup> Most aggravating of all must have been *The Midnight Ace*, a detective feature shot at the Brooklyn Vitagraph studio early in 1928 by the Dunbar Film Corporation, formed by Micheaux's one-time partner, his scapegrace brother Swan Micheaux.<sup>178</sup> The fact that all these competitors faded so quickly (while many other hopefuls never even completed a film), indicates how brutal a business the race film market really was. Micheaux himself went into voluntary bankruptcy in 1928, although one would never know this from looking at his release schedule over the next few years. No sooner had he reorganized than he was back in Fort Lee, preparing to remake many of his silent pictures as talkies.



The studio that Fox opened on West 55th Street in 1920 was a typical New York “vertical” studio, with all functions contained within a single multistory structure. In Hollywood, shops, stages, and offices generally occupied separate buildings. Museum of the Moving Image.



# 4

## Studio City

### Fox in Manhattan

While most studios in New York and New Jersey were reinventing themselves to operate as rental facilities for a new kind of producer, a few of the “majors,” including Fox, Vitagraph, Metro, Hearst-Cosmopolitan, and First National, agreed with Paramount that what they really needed was a traditional brick-and-mortar studio of their own. The first of these to expand in New York after the war was Fox, which opened a large New York studio in 1920 with the intention of centralizing a sprawling East Coast operation that was spread all over New York and New Jersey. In addition to its main studio in Fort Lee (the old Éclair studio on Linwood Avenue), Fox had been leasing five additional New Jersey studios, four in Manhattan, the Biograph studio in the Bronx, the Triangle studio in Yonkers, and the Hal Benedict studio at College Point (not to mention a temporary studio set up in Miami the previous winter, which had to accommodate four separate companies).<sup>1</sup> Construction on both the Fox and the Paramount studios began in the summer of 1919, and each was eventually completed at a reported cost of \$2.5 million.<sup>2</sup> But while Paramount’s Long Island studio was soon producing 40 percent of the company’s entire release schedule, Fox’s New York operation never came close to the goal of 50 percent once predicted by William Fox.<sup>3</sup>

Designed by the architect William Fried, the Fox studio was in some ways a more ambitious project than the rival Paramount plant. Where Paramount had built separate studio and laboratory buildings in Long Island City, leaving the home office in Manhattan, Fried combined studio, laboratory, and corporate headquarters

under one roof (and unlike the Paramount studio, Fox's was air-conditioned). Located at 850 Tenth Avenue, the new building contained 150,000 square feet of floor space and ran along the entire east side of the block from 55th to 56th Street. Generators were located in the basement, and administrative offices shared the first and second floors with a film lab capable of producing three thousand reels of release print each week.<sup>4</sup> This left all the production areas, from carpentry shops to stage space, up on the third floor.

The cornerstone of the new studio was laid by Manhattan Borough President Frank Dowling on June 6, 1919. In a curious invocation, the Reverend Justin Corcoran of the Church of the Madonna in Fort Lee (the location of Fox's existing East Coast production center) expressed his "regret" at the departure of the Fox forces. "I have seen at Fort Lee so many battles fought in our back yards, so many boys run away, so many Huns killed, so many people maimed, that I will be lonesome without you."<sup>5</sup> William Fox was ill and did not attend the ceremony, although he was present on May 24, less than a year later, for the grand opening (six months before Paramount was able to open its own New York studio). New Jersey Governor Edward Edwards and New York Supreme Court Justice Charles Guy were among the visitors who toured the crowded sets and observed directors Harry Millarde, Dell Henderson, George Beranger, Richard Stanton, and Charles Brabin hard at work on an impressive variety of feature films. According to the *Motion Picture News*, twenty-eight full sets were already standing, although work on the laboratory was still incomplete.<sup>6</sup>

One reporter who visited these stages some months later seemed genuinely impressed at the way Fried had laid out the facility. "The studio where the pictures are acted consumes the entire top floor of the building," wrote Boston film critic Katherine Lyons:

There are really two studios in one, being divided into two enormous stages, one 275 by 100 feet; the other 125 by 85 feet. On the two stages seven directors can work at one time without interfering with one another, which means that seven complete picture productions can be made simultaneously on this one floor. An idea of the spaciousness can be gleaned from the fact that constructed buildings or palatial residences are tossed aside in corners awaiting the necessary call to action.<sup>7</sup>

Lyons should have paid more attention to those piles of unused settings taking up floor space. In fact, the decision to centralize all operations in one structure resulted in so many design compromises that the studio was probably obsolete even before it opened. There was no back lot and no direct street access to the stages. Although the roof was supported by a large truss structure, which kept the floor

free of supporting pillars, the effect was still somewhat like an attic, and ceiling heights were clearly inadequate. “The Famous Players–Lasky studio has the fittings of a palace,” the *New York Times* reported. “The Fox property is architecturally not as impressive; it looks more like a factory than a public edifice.”<sup>8</sup> Joseph Ruttenberg, then a Fox cameraman, remembered that “it was difficult to build any good-size sets.” He was standing with William Fox when George Eastman was given a tour. “I remember Mr. Fox saying, ‘You see, George, there isn’t a post in the whole building!’” Eastman only shrugged his shoulders, visibly unimpressed.<sup>9</sup> And no interior stage, of any size, could compensate for the lack of a proper back lot. Scenes that would normally have been filmed out of doors now had to be shot in the studio, often with unfortunate results. Fox cameraman Hal Sintzenich noted in his diary for November 15, 1920, “Worked in the studio on the Serial *Fantomas* with Mr. Sedgewick all day. Quit about 4 PM as Director Dawley was doing a fire scene & filled the studio with smoke.”<sup>10</sup>

Few of Fox’s top stars or directors would ever work at the new studio. Theda Bara had already completed her Fox contract, and Tom Mix was firmly established in Hollywood, as were most of Fox’s major directors. Raoul Walsh, who had made many films for Fox in Fort Lee and had recently completed *The Strongest* (probably at the rented Metro studio), left the company that year.<sup>11</sup> William Fox saw the West Coast studio (which he almost never visited) as a factory whose predictable output of star vehicles could be supervised at long distance. But special productions, which he was “ambitious to personally supervise,” would be made under his direct control

Visitors flocked to the Fox studio for its grand opening on May 24, 1920. Here they stop to watch Charles Brabin direct Estelle Taylor in *While New York Sleeps*. Bison Archives.



in the East. "The facilities and possibilities for making special productions in New York are by far of greater advantage than they are in Los Angeles," he wrote to Sol Wurtzel in Hollywood. "That is why they will be made here."<sup>12</sup>

He did make one exception, however. The Tenth Avenue studio needed an anchor, a great star or director whose productions might serve as an engine for the rest of the plant. But unlike Paramount, Fox was not in the habit of hiring Broadway celebrities like the Barrymores, Alice Brady, or Billie Burke. The star of Fox's new Manhattan studio, he announced, would be Pathé serial queen Pearl White. Unfortunately, his new acquisition still had one year to go on her Pathé contract, and in order to make the deal, Fox had to accept a non-compete clause: he agreed not to star Pearl White in any kind of serial. Instead, she would appear in "screen adaptations of stage successes and novels," a remarkable concession akin to using Charlie Chaplin in anything but a comedy.<sup>13</sup>

Of all the great stars of the silent screen, only Pearl White managed to avoid working in Hollywood entirely.<sup>14</sup> Comfortably situated in her Bayside mansion, she had no interest in following the rest of the industry to the West Coast. After completing *The Black Secret* (1919) for George B. Seitz at Pathé's 134th Street studio, she essentially ran out her career with the string of ten nondescript features she made for Fox in New York.<sup>15</sup> Perhaps she already understood that the vogue for female action heroes, with which she was completely identified, was already a thing of the past: in the summer of 1919 she had even announced her intention of quitting films and running for a seat in the New York State Assembly.<sup>16</sup> White's first picture for Fox, *The White Moll*, was shot mainly at the Éclair studio in Fort Lee, but on January 31, 1920, the company moved into its new Manhattan studio for the "last few days work," the first crew to work there.<sup>17</sup> *The White Moll* still conveyed some of the gritty quality that had marked the best of her Pathé serials, but Fox then tried to reinvent her as an upscale heroine of society melodramas, replacing action sequences with increasingly elaborate costume displays. The experiment failed, and when Pearl White left Fox in early 1922, much of the rationale for keeping the New York studio open left with her. She returned to Pathé for one last serial, *Plunder* (shot at the 134th Street studio at the end of 1922), but the genre had moved on without her, and her fans now followed the exploits of Charles Hutchinson and Harry Houdini.

Oddly enough, even as Fox cast the world's greatest serial star in a series of inappropriate features, the studio was simultaneously filming *Bride 13* (1920) and *Fantomás* (1920–1921), the only two serials it ever produced. *Fantomás*, directed by slapstick specialist Eddie Sedgwick, was a mistaken effort to remake the classic French serial for American audiences. *Bride 13* was somewhat more original, involving a mass kidnapping of American heiresses by a gang of Tripolitan pirates, and the efforts of the U.S. Navy to set things right. It was directed by Richard Stanton, who that same year made Fox's most offensive anti-immigrant, anti-labor picture, *The*



*Face at Your Window*. Stanton took over the entire town of Boonton, New Jersey, to make this film, which dealt with Russian-instigated labor agitation in an American factory town. When the workers revolt, peace is restored by an influx of American Legion members dressed in Ku Klux Klan regalia.<sup>18</sup>

If Pearl White was the studio's resident star during its first years of operation, the only director to work there with any frequency was the little-known Harry Millarde. Millarde was an actor who had entered films with the Kalem Company, where he had his greatest success as the hapless victim in Robert Vignola's *The Vampire* (1913).<sup>19</sup> He began directing around 1916 and soon moved to Fox, where he married his leading lady, June Caprice. In April 1920 Millarde began directing *Over the Hill*, a sentimental family melodrama that became one of the highest-grossing films of the silent era. Based on two narrative poems written by Will Carleton fifty years earlier, *Over the Hill* told the story of a family torn apart by selfishness and guilt, and made instant stars of Mary Carr, as the long-suffering mother, and Johnnie Walker, who played a wastrel son who redeems himself through heroic sacrifice. Also known as *Over the Hill to the Poorhouse*, the project was personally supervised by William Fox, who even claimed to have devised the screen adaptation himself. "We used no script for the picture," Fox later told his biographer, Upton Sinclair. "The director came to me every morning and I recited the scenes that he would photograph that day. Many times while the story was in progress he insisted that the material he had finished could not possibly make a motion picture."<sup>20</sup> After four months of aggravation with Millarde's slow progress, Fox took the picture away from him and completed it himself, as he had done with Herbert Brenon's *A Daughter of the Gods* four years earlier.<sup>21</sup>

Nevertheless, Millarde continued to be assigned Fox's most elaborate East Coast productions. The following year he spent six weeks and \$50,000 building an entire country village on the old Fox property in Fort Lee for *The Town That Forgot God*. To supply the film's "big punch," the set was lashed by a "thunderstorm" powered by five airplane engines and drowned in a quarter million gallons of floodwaters supposedly generated by a bursting dam.<sup>22</sup> True to form, Millarde worked on the film for another year before Fox released it.

Despite all the problems and delays *Over the Hill* was a critical and commercial smash. One industry survey found it listed on five out of six critics' "ten best" lists.<sup>23</sup> Three years later, in a survey of 37,000 high school students conducted by the Russell Sage Foundation, it was still cited as one of the best films of all time, behind only *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse*, *Way Down East*, and *The Sheik*.<sup>24</sup> William Fox recalled that it earned \$3 million on a \$100,000 investment (cameraman Joseph Ruttenberg thought the figure was \$5 million).<sup>25</sup> Unfortunately, neither the film nor its director have any place in most film histories. As is the case with nearly all the films Fox made in New York and New Jersey, no prints of *Over the Hill* (or *The Town*



*That Forgot God*) are known to survive. On July 9, 1937, a series of violent explosions ripped through the company's film storage vaults in Little Ferry, New Jersey. A thirteen-year-old boy was killed, and all 40,000 reels of nitrate film were incinerated, effectively obliterating the silent history of the Fox Film Corporation.<sup>26</sup>

After Pearl White left in 1922, activity at the Fox New York studio gradually slowed to a halt. William Fox himself began to lose interest in production and concentrated his energies on his theater operations. Sol Wurtzel, whose power as West Coast production head increased when activity in New York slowed down, was not unhappy. "I think the New York studio building is wonderful," he wrote to director J. Gordon Edwards. "However, I still prefer Los Angeles. I do not see how people can live in New York, take part in the night life and still make pictures. It can't be done!"<sup>27</sup>

The small number of Fox films shot in New York in 1923 included a Hope Hampton picture, *Does It Pay?* and *The Silent Command*, directed by J. Gordon Edwards, in which Bela Lugosi plots to blow up the Panama Canal.<sup>28</sup> Harry Millarde continued to direct two films each year, his major 1923 production being *If Winter Comes*, a prestigious adaptation of A. S. M. Hutchinson's best-selling novel. Released at the remarkable length of twelve reels (as long as *Orphans of the Storm*), this family melodrama was set in England against the background of World War I. Millarde



Hungarian stage and screen actor Bela Lugosi, not yet associated with supernatural roles, assaults American agent Edmund Lowe in Fox's *The Silent Command* (1923). Museum of Modern Art/Film Stills Archive.

was a fastidious taskmaster of the old school, and his crews occasionally resisted what they considered his excessive demands for realism. For example, when Millarde insisted that the research department see to it that all the crockery used in the film was authentic British porcelain, prop man Ted Altman simply made up three rubber stamps and stamped all of the studio's stock chinaware until Millarde was convinced that they had come directly from London. "There was no such thing as research. We didn't bother with research," Altman later admitted.<sup>29</sup>

The last films produced at the studio as part of Fox's regular program were Millarde's *The Fool* (shot in early 1924, but released late the following year); an Elmer Rice murder-mystery called *It Is the Law*, directed by J. Gordon Edwards; and two Elmer Clifton films, *The Warrens of Virginia* and *Daughters of the Night*.<sup>30</sup> It was while filming location scenes in San Antonio for *The Warrens* that Martha Mansfield, one of New York's busiest screen actors, burned to death when her crinolines caught fire.<sup>31</sup> By the summer of 1924, the studio had completely shut down and was being advertised for rent ("three spacious stages, one of them enormous").<sup>32</sup> Although Fox announced later that year that it would use the New York studio to produce film versions of two recently acquired Broadway plays, *Lightnin'* and *7th Heaven*, both productions were ultimately made in Hollywood.<sup>33</sup>

With no New York-based talent under contract, no production executives located in the East, and an enormous new studio facility under construction in Beverly Hills, it seemed unlikely that Fox would ever produce features in New York again. But at the end of 1926, as Paramount prepared to shut down its Astoria studio, Allan Dwan signed with Fox. Dwan still hated some aspects of the Hollywood production system and still had the power to make certain demands. Working out of Fox's New York studio, where his was the only active production unit, Dwan made four features in less than a year.<sup>34</sup> These were small films without big stars, so insignificant in the context of Fox's annual release schedule that Dwan was allowed to do pretty much whatever he wanted.

The first, *Summer Bachelors* (1926), was a curious romantic comedy about a group of New York husbands whose wives leave them for the summer—sort of an ensemble version of *The Seven Year Itch*. It was shot by Joseph Ruttenberg, Fox's head cameraman, but for his later films Dwan brought in George Webber, who had decided not to go west with the rest of the Paramount staff. Webber shot *The Joy Girl* (largely in Palm Beach); *The Music Master*, a family melodrama about an elderly conductor searching for his daughter; and Dwan's last New York production, *East Side, West Side* (1927). A convoluted tale of an Irish orphan's rise from the slums, *East Side, West Side* starred George O'Brien, straight from four months' work on F. W. Murnau's *Sunrise*. The contrast between the lavish artifice of Murnau's Hollywood picture and the realistic texture achieved by Dwan and Webber while shooting on the streets of New York was emblematic of the differences between East and West Coast production even in the 1920s (although the film's staging of the sinking of the *Titanic* is

certainly as melodramatic as anything ever produced in Hollywood). But as far as the silent cinema was concerned, any such distinctions were academic: just as Dwan was shooting these last few films, the real news at the studio was happening around the corner, where Fox's first Movietone talkies were being produced.

### Vitagraph in the 1920s

While Queens was dotted with studios in Flushing, Long Island City, Glendale, College Point, and Astoria, production in Brooklyn was dominated by the old Vitagraph studio at the corner of 14th Street and Locust Avenue in Flatbush.<sup>35</sup> Founded in New York in 1897, American Vitagraph had opened this studio, the first modern motion picture plant in the country, in 1906. Vitagraph also operated a studio in Hollywood but continued to produce most of its features in Brooklyn until it was acquired by Warner Bros. in 1925. The company had been seriously weakened during the war, when it lost its strong position in the European market, and because it had expanded internationally instead of acquiring a chain of domestic theaters, Vitagraph was at a distinct disadvantage at home when the time came to compete with Paramount and First National. Albert E. Smith, who ran Vitagraph on his own after his partner J. Stuart Blackton left in 1917, was unwilling or unable to assemble the financing that fueled his most aggressive opponents. He was left with a handful of midlevel stars, whom he divided about equally between the East and West Coast studios: Earle Williams, Antonio Moreno, and the slapstick comedian Larry Semon worked in California; Corinne Griffith, Alice Joyce, Harry Morey, Gladys Leslie (in 1919), and Alice Calhoun (in 1921) stayed in Brooklyn.<sup>36</sup>

For a variety of reasons, most historians find Vitagraph completely uninteresting in the post-Blackton era, and even Smith in his autobiography passes over it in a few pages.<sup>37</sup> But the studio did play a significant role in New York during the immediate postwar period, especially with its Corinne Griffith and Alice Joyce films. Griffith had been with Vitagraph since 1916, and in New York's postwar production boom she suddenly emerged as the busiest star in the city: eight of her films were released in 1919, six in 1920, and four each in 1921 and 1922. Like Clara Bow, she had entered films as a beauty contest winner and was valued more for her good looks than her acting ability (eventually she came to be known as "The Orchid Lady" of the silent screen).<sup>38</sup> Possibly because she was the only conventional young beauty under contract, Vitagraph cast her in a wide range of comedies, thrillers, and society melodramas, roles that at other studios might have been given to Gloria Swanson or either of the Talmadges. In *The Adventure Shop* (1919) she played a bored society girl who sets up a business that provides prepackaged "thrills" to other bored society types, while in *Deadline at Eleven* (1920) she was a crime-solving reporter on a Manhattan daily.

Alice Joyce was six years older (she was born in Kansas City in 1890) and had

entered films with the Kalem Company in 1910, joining Vitagraph in 1916. She was almost as busy as Griffith, starring in a dozen Vitagraph features between 1919 and 1921, generally in more mature roles. She appeared in theatrical adaptations like *The Lion and the Mouse* and *The Third Degree* (both directed by Tom Terriss in 1919), and made at least one film for Mrs. Sidney Drew (*Cousin Kate*, 1921), one of the few women directors working in the East in the postwar period.

In addition to films featuring the various stars located in New York, Vitagraph also produced a handful of specials there, including an adaptation of David Belasco's *The Heart of Maryland* (1921) and *The Son of Wallingford* (1921), written and directed by Mr. and Mrs. George Randolph Chester, creators of the popular "Get-Rich-Quick Wallingford" character. A costly film that boasted the largest set yet built in the Flatbush studio, *Wallingford* proved a box-office disappointment when Adolph Zukor released a similar title only a few weeks later.<sup>39</sup>

It is difficult to judge the quality of Vitagraph's product in this period because of the scarcity of surviving prints. Corinne Griffith and Alice Joyce did have a following and even increased their popularity after leaving Vitagraph (both appeared in many successful films for First National and Paramount). On the other hand, little was heard in the future from the technical staff responsible for these pictures. Directors Tom Terriss, George Terwilliger, and Webster Campbell never made much of an impression in Hollywood, and cameramen Joseph Shelderfer and Arthur Ross appear to have left the industry entirely. This is not what happened when production shut down at Paramount and Fox, for example. But whatever the quality of its films, Vitagraph's inability to tie down the exhibition end of the business eventually doomed the whole operation. Corinne Griffith's company was the last unit at the Brooklyn studio in 1922, and by 1923 production on both coasts had slowed to a trickle. Vitagraph had a hand in Distinctive's remake of *Wildfire*, shot in Brooklyn in the spring of 1925, but on April 22 this last surviving member of the Motion Picture Patents Company was swallowed up by the Warner brothers.<sup>40</sup>

### ***The Chronicles of America***

During the postwar period, many of the existing East Coast studios rapidly lost status as production facilities. Studios that had once served as the home base of important film manufacturers were reorganized as rental stages, and if they failed in this function, they became theatrical warehouses or even factories. Once the busiest studio in America, the Vitagraph lot had seen the coming of the nickelodeon, the feature-length film, and the Broadway picture palace. Within a few years it would be the center of Warner Bros.' short-film production. But in 1922 it became home to a very different kind of filmmaking, an elaborate series of educational films sponsored by Yale University Press called *The Chronicles of America*.<sup>41</sup>

The original idea for the films came from a Canadian publisher, Glasgow & Brook, whose popular *Chronicles of Canada* series had been followed by an even more ambitious *Chronicles of America*. That series of fifty volumes, issued under the auspices of Yale University Press, traced the history of the United States from the days of Columbus to the administration of Woodrow Wilson. It had occurred to Robert Glasgow as early as 1918 to tie in these books with a series of educational films, produced to the highest standards of historical accuracy and endorsed by the same group of Yale historians that was behind the books. A so-called nontheatrical film market already existed, with a handful of small producers creating sponsored films on a range of scientific, technical, or religious subjects. The widespread use of motion pictures by various government agencies during World War I had given a tremendous impetus to the use of film as an educational tool, and hundreds of schools, churches, union halls, and lyceums across the country were equipped with rudimentary 35mm projectors capable of showing such films.<sup>42</sup>

Glasgow eventually was put in contact with Arthur Edwin Krows, then working as a continuity editor for Vitagraph. While the publisher blocked out a prospective series of thirty-six films, Krows prepared estimating scripts for the first of them, *Columbus* and *Jamestown*. In the summer of 1921 Krows presented these scripts at Yale before a panel of distinguished historians, including Allen Johnson, Charles M. Andrews, Max Farrand, and Anson Phelps Stokes. "The scripts certainly were unique in form, made so to accommodate the peculiar demands of the situation," Krows recalled. "They were typed on long, foolscap sheets to care for elaborate footnotes on each page, which gave historical justification and amplification of every major point. In the first two scripts alone, the supporting notes totaled more than 50,000 words."<sup>43</sup> Krows was grilled on technical details by this panel, which then passed the material along to Yale University Press with its blessing. By the beginning of 1922 a new organization had been formed to produce the films, called The Chronicles of America Picture Corporation. The president was George Parmly Day, founder and head of Yale University Press. With the press so intimately involved, it was relatively easy to capitalize the operation through a stock offering.

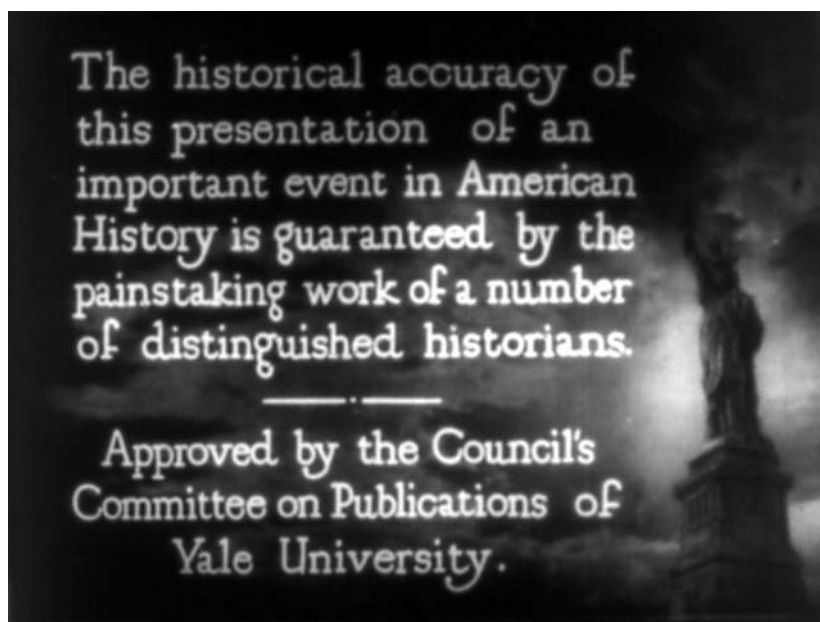
Production soon began on *Columbus*, and the company was lucky enough to locate a full-scale reconstruction of the *Santa Maria* that had been floating in Chicago's Jackson Park Lagoon since the Columbian Exposition of 1893. Although the *Nina* and the *Pinta* were by now considerably beyond repair, the *Santa Maria* was towed out into Lake Michigan for a few impressive establishing shots.<sup>44</sup> Back in New York, an estate at Mount Kisco doubled for the palace of King John of Portugal, the La Rabida monastery was shot in Huntington, and beach scenes showing Queen Isabella's messenger overtaking Columbus were filmed along the shore at Montauk. Interiors were built at the Vitagraph studio in Flatbush.<sup>45</sup> Actors were recruited



mainly from the theater: Fred Eric played Columbus, and Dolores Casinelli, an opera singer, was Queen Isabella. Direction was begun by Carlisle Ellis, a specialist in educational and industrial pictures, but he was soon replaced by Edwin L. Hollywood, who had been in charge of Harry Morey's unit at Vitagraph.<sup>46</sup>

*Columbus* (1923) was released theatrically as a five-reel feature, and the next production, the four-reel *Jamestown* (1923), was almost as elaborate. The company took over what had once been the Kinemacolor studio at Whitestone landing and rebuilt the seventeenth-century colony on the shores of Long Island Sound (although weather conditions proved so raw that winter that one of the extras, clad as an "Indian," caught pneumonia and died). The original business plan had called for a series of two-reel films, but Pathé, the distributor, must have encouraged the company to issue these subjects as features. Subsequent productions, however, were all in the three-reel range.<sup>47</sup>

Krows and his successor, William Basil Courtney (who had spent eight years at Vitagraph writing for Mr. and Mrs. Sidney Drew), worked especially hard on the scripts, ordering treatments not from the usual freelance screenwriters, but from such local journalists as James O. Spearing, film critic of the *New York Times*, and Lynde Denig, a feature writer for various motion picture magazines. At least one of the films, *The Eve of the Revolution* (1924), was co-written by George Pierce Baker



Yale University Press boasted of the scholarly authority behind its *Chronicles of America* series, an impressive achievement that predated similar educational documentaries by half a century. Frame enlargement.



of the Yale University drama school. Krows feared that conventional screenwriters would introduce a stack of romantic clichés and hoped to avoid this by hiring untainted outsiders. It was more difficult to find that sort of director, and after Edwin Hollywood left, most of the remaining films were directed by Kenneth Webb and Webster Campbell. *Peter Stuyvesant* (1924) and *The Puritans* (1924) were made by Film Guild staffers Frank Tuttle and Fred Waller just before they signed with Paramount.

The *Chronicles of America* company produced a total of fifteen films before production ended in June 1924.<sup>48</sup> Developed chronologically, the series had progressed through the American Revolution and completed a few nineteenth-century subjects, including *The Frontier Woman* (1923) and *Dixie* (1924), a study of the antebellum South. According to Krows's account, Yale University Press had spent some \$1.25 million on the films and was having considerable trouble recovering its investment. It was impossible to extract much income from the theatrical market, and the educators who were expected to purchase copies for their own collections demanded the sort of teaching manual that did not then exist. To support the films, Yale published such a volume in 1929, *Motion Pictures in History Teaching* by Daniel Knowlton and J. Warren Tilton, but by then production had long since come to a halt.

From one point of view, *The Chronicles of America* could be seen as a classic boondoggle, the work of naive professors with no understanding of the realities of motion picture production or distribution. The company was cutting its teeth on the first few films, and considerable confusion and inefficiency prevailed. "The word spread like wild-fire through the theatrical district," Krows remembered, "that here was a fine, fat, foolish cow waiting to be milked, and players and technical men flocked without conscience to share the cream."<sup>49</sup> Sets of the films in 35mm were very expensive, and the 16mm market, which reduced distribution costs considerably, was not well established until later in the 1920s. But it must also be recognized that the project was a great success in legitimizing the educational film market and creating a viable production niche for instructional and informational media (much of which would soon be located in New York). As late as 1941, the American Museum of Natural History circulated three sets of the films in 35mm and nine more in 16mm. *The Chronicles of America* became the first documentary film series ever shown on American television, when New York station WNBC aired nine of the episodes between July 3 and October 16, 1941.

### Metro

In 1915 Metro Pictures Corporation had constructed a large studio atop an office building at 3 West 61st Street, overlooking Central Park. The stage area was 290 × 92 feet, big enough for several companies to work at the same time, and offices and

dressing rooms sprawled over several other floors. The studio was first used by J. Searle Dawley's Dyreda Art Films, which made *The Four Feathers* there in 1915; later it became the base of operations for B. A. Rolfe Productions. Both had releasing deals with Metro.<sup>50</sup> After Metro abandoned production in New York in 1918, it rented the studio to other producers; Fox had had J. Gordon Edwards working there in 1919, for example. But on October 25, 1919, it was announced that Metro had renewed its lease on the space and would be returning to New York in force.<sup>51</sup> "Metro officials have always recognized the advantages of producing in New York City, which balances the slightly lower cost of western production by greater accessibility to the market, a closer touch with more of the finest actors of the stage and screen, and a more intimate working connection between the producing and the executive departments of the motion picture company," reported the *Motion Picture News*.<sup>52</sup>

In January 1920 complete control of Metro Pictures Corporation was acquired by Marcus Loew, a powerful New York theater owner who needed to secure a steady supply of features for his growing exhibition empire. He was also trying to protect himself against the expansion of Paramount and First National, then battling to monopolize the industry's key theaters and production personnel.<sup>53</sup> Only a month later, Metro president Richard Rowland arrived in New York after conducting Loew around the West Coast facilities. He announced an immediate expansion of operations on both coasts: a million dollars for new construction at the California studio, and even more for a lavish new studio in the East. While a location for this plant was being chosen (Long Island and an upstate site "along the Hudson" were mentioned), the 61st Street studio would immediately be reopened. Metro expected to be operating twelve to fifteen separate companies in the East by the time both studios were in full operation. Maxwell Karger would be in charge of production, and M. P. Staulcup, "supervisor of art interiors," had already arrived in New York to prepare the 61st Street stages.<sup>54</sup> Metro made extensive alterations to the studio, pouring new concrete floors, painting over the old glass roof, and installing an updated lighting system. Press reports described the new stage as 150 × 73 feet, suggesting that half the original space was now devoted to scenery shops and storage. "Mr. Staulcup intends to use the natural 'backings' that the studio affords for New York scenes," *Moving Picture World* reported, citing the commanding views of Broadway, Columbus Circle, and Central Park.<sup>55</sup>

Because the company had closed down its New York operation so completely, Metro had no production personnel in the East and no suitable projects in development. The first film put into the studio was a Sawyer-Lubin (S-L) production that Metro had contracted to distribute, *Love, Honor and Obey* (1920), a wild melodrama directed by Leander de Cordoba and starring Wilda Bennett.<sup>56</sup> The film began shooting in early May but got off to a bad start when Bennett was temporarily blinded by the studio lighting (a not uncommon result of unshielded ultraviolet radiation, generally referred to as "klieg eyes"). Like other New York companies

operating with no back lot, Metro's crews went out on location as often as possible, and parts of *Love, Honor and Obey* were shot at Coney Island, Great Neck, Hastings-on-Hudson, and the town of Harmon, New York.<sup>57</sup>

When Metro's main contingent finally arrived in June, it included the company's most important star, Bert Lytell, screenwriter Lois Zellner, and June Mathis, the head of the scenario department, who had been charged with making a film out of Vicente Blasco-Ibanez's best-selling novel *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse*.<sup>58</sup> Within a relatively short amount of time, things had gotten very busy. The West 61st Street studio was working to capacity with three productions filming simultaneously, and Metro announced that it would also build a \$2 million studio on Long Island.<sup>59</sup>

But June Mathis returned to the West Coast in July, claiming that the studio was too crowded with its existing schedule to accommodate the filming of *The Four Horsemen*.<sup>60</sup> She did get one thing out of New York, however. That summer a struggling young actor named Rodolfo de Valentino, who had been playing minor roles in Hollywood, had come east to appear in two unimportant features, *Stolen Moments*, made by the American Cinema Corporation in Florida, and *The Wonderful Chance*, produced by Lewis J. Selznick in New Jersey. According to a 1923 interview, Valentino learned that Metro was about to produce *The Four Horsemen* and presented himself to Maxwell Karger at the New York studio (Karger had been best man at Valentino's ill-fated wedding to Jean Acker the year before). Karger then introduced Valentino to Mathis, who apparently cast him on the spot.<sup>61</sup> Even though Karger remained to supervise eastern production, activity began to run down almost as soon as Mathis was out the door. Nothing more was heard of the \$2 million Long Island studio, and by March 1921 Metro had abandoned New York for the second time.<sup>62</sup>

Metro's impact in New York in the postwar era was slight, a total of nine features produced in a ten-month period, two of them actually made by S-L Pictures.<sup>63</sup> Except for Bert Lytell, who made three films here, there were no stars of any drawing power. Ina Claire did appear in *Polly with a Past* (1920), with Ralph Graves in support, but she never caught on as a film star and made no further silent films. While shooting *Polly*, she was moonlighting from her leading role in Belasco's *The Gold Diggers* and spent the rest of the decade on Broadway.<sup>64</sup>

Most of Metro's New York films were shot by Arthur Cadwell, a New York cameraman, and Arthur Martinelli, a Metro veteran who had been with the company for years. Directors were local at-liberty types like Fred Sittenham and George Terwilliger. At the end, Karger had to direct two pictures himself, including the studio's most elaborate production, *A Message from Mars* (1921). In this curious romantic fantasy, almost a science-fiction version of *A Christmas Carol*, Bert Lytell is an Englishman involved with a radio invention designed to communicate with

the planet Mars. A Martian comes to him in a dream and shows him the effects of poverty and selfishness on the planet Earth. He wakes just in time to prove his own worth by saving a woman from a burning Whitechapel tenement. The tenement street was a set built in Long Island City at the Recreation Ball Park; the most elaborate exteriors, however, representing a full block in South Kensington, were constructed inside the Eighth Coast Artillery Armory at Jerome Avenue and Kingsbridge Road in the Bronx.<sup>65</sup> No art director was credited for *Message from Mars*, but most of Metro's New York films were designed by Staulcup or Lester J. Vermilyea, a local designer. One of Staulcup's most spectacular achievements was rebuilding the Tower of London along the Stamford, Connecticut, waterfront for *The Fatal Hour* (1920), a thriller involving the attempted theft of the Crown Jewels.

Regardless of such accomplishments, Staulcup, Vermilyea, and cameraman Arthur Cadwell essentially abandoned the business when Metro shut down the studio.<sup>66</sup> Arthur Martinelli went back to Hollywood to continue photographing Bert Lytell. Maxwell Karger, once described by Bosley Crowther as "a bluff, bombastic man who had previously been a violinist with the Metropolitan Opera orchestra," directed a few more films for Metro on the West Coast before he, too, vanished from the industry.<sup>67</sup> The 61st Street studio was once again thrown onto the rental market and hosted a range of modestly budgeted independent features, including Edwin Carewe's *Mighty Lak a Rose* (1922) and Will Nigh's *Marriage Morals* (1923). In October 1924 it was reported that the studio would be closed permanently and converted into a garage.<sup>68</sup>

### Davies and Hearst

During the time his International Film Service was associated with Vitagraph and Pathé, William Randolph Hearst had had little need for his own studio. His newsreel and animated cartoon operations could be run out of midtown office space, and the few features he began to distribute in 1916 (for example, Alice Blaché's *The Ocean Waif*) were produced by others. But in 1918 Hearst set up the Marion Davies Film Company to produce films starring his protégé, a Broadway showgirl he first saw in the 1916 *Ziegfeld Follies*. Davies had already appeared in one feature, a low-budget effort called *Runaway Romany* (1917), shot at one of the local Pathé studios and directed by her brother-in-law, theatrical producer George Lederer.<sup>69</sup> A screen test clearly designed to impress Hearst, *Runaway Romany* was a complete success: Davies became a star, Hearst became a producer, and motion pictures became the great shared experience of their lives.

Deciding against trying to distribute Davies's films through his own International Film Service, Hearst signed with Lewis J. Selznick's Select. Selznick knew

nothing of Davies's acting ability but fully understood the power of the Hearst press. He could hardly have been surprised when their first release, *Cecilia of the Pink Roses* (1918), was hailed by the *New York Journal* in eight-column banner headlines and the *New York American* concluded that "[o]nly a marble heart could have withstood the charms of Marion Davies."<sup>70</sup> Hearst was not the only millionaire to put his girlfriend into the movies, but none of his rivals had the resources of a national newspaper chain to support their efforts.

Hearst produced six features for distribution by Select that first year: *The Hidden Truth* (1918), starring soprano Anna Case; *Break the News to Mother* (1919), a melodrama based on Charles K. Harris's sentimental ballad; and four Marion Davies films. All but one of these were directed by Julius Steger, a minor East Coast director who had just completed two films with the notorious Evelyn Nesbit Thaw. Steger directed *Break the News to Mother* (and possibly the others, as well) at the Talmadge studio on East 48th Street.<sup>71</sup> Both Joseph Schenck and Hearst released through Select, and both abandoned Selznick in 1919 following his public break with Zukor. But while Schenck placed his Talmadge films with First National, Hearst had bigger plans. He folded the Marion Davies Film Company into a new outfit, Cosmopolitan Productions, and signed a releasing deal with Zukor himself.<sup>72</sup>

With the death of his mother, Phoebe Hearst, in 1919, William Randolph Hearst gained complete control of the family fortune. His spending habits increased dramatically, and one of his first moves was to upgrade the quality of his films, bringing in the best writers, directors, and designers money could buy. According to historian David Nasaw, Hearst's approach to the movies was the opposite of his tactic in the newspaper business, where he "extended the audience . . . downward" into the working class. Hearst's films would be directed to the upper end of the audience spectrum, a market he felt was not sufficiently served by existing American producers.<sup>73</sup> When Zukor complained about the cost of the initial Hearst-Paramount productions, Hearst responded with a statement of principles that made clear just how he intended to approach this motion picture business. "I admit that our pictures are expensive," he wrote, "but that does not matter to me if I can make them sufficiently good. . . . Making pictures is fundamentally like making publications. It is in each case an endeavor to entertain, enlighten and uplift the public. In fact, the same material is used more and more in both publication and picture."<sup>74</sup> Hearst was, in fact, the first to recognize the tremendous possibilities of media synergy, cross-promoting his newspapers, newsreels, animated films, motion picture serials, and general-interest story magazines as far back as *The Perils of Pauline* (1914). Even more remarkable, in his desire to "enlighten and uplift" the filmgoing public he seems never to have taken financial considerations into account.

The change in policy was already apparent in *Getting Mary Married* (1919), the last of the Davies films distributed by Select. Hearst hired Allan Dwan to direct

from a script by John Emerson and Anita Loos. It was the first film to bring out Davies's considerable comedic gifts, and if Emerson and Loos had been available, she might have continued with the sort of light romantic comedies that Constance Talmadge was about to make. But Emerson and Loos had just signed their remarkable writer-producer deal with Schenck, so Hearst turned to someone very different to write the next Davies pictures, Frances Marion.

One of Hearst's goals was to establish Marion Davies as the new Mary Pickford, and a logical way to do this was to hire Mary Pickford's screenwriter. To lure Frances Marion away from Pickford cost Hearst \$100,000 a year, making her the highest-paid writer in the business—a fact that was not kept secret from the rest of the industry.<sup>75</sup> A master of the sentimental "woman's picture," Marion was credited with such Pickford classics as *Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm* (1917) and *Stella Maris* (1918), but during her years at Fort Lee's World studios she had written everything from adaptations of *Camille* (1915) and *La vie de bohème* (1916) to spy thrillers like *On Dangerous Ground* (1917). Marion was not a comedy specialist, and her most successful films for Cosmopolitan would be those she wrote for some of Hearst's other stars. But despite the talents evident in *Getting Mary Married*, Hearst was not looking to put Marion Davies into something funny.

Marion wrote only three of the New York Davies pictures, beginning with *The Dark Star* (1919), an espionage thriller in the Pearl White style directed by Allan Dwan.<sup>76</sup> *The Cinema Murder* (1919) was a more conventional mystery, although the subplot—a Wall Street financier tries to promote his young protégée as a dramatic actress—must have seemed a bit of an inside joke. The last of the group, *The Restless Sex* (1920), a society melodrama based on a novel by Robert W. Chambers, is most notable today as the first film shot in Hearst's massive new studio on 127th Street.

Hearst had great hopes for his association with Zukor, but almost immediately he began to feel that he and Cosmopolitan were being cheated by Paramount's creative accounting practices. By 1921 he was angry enough to consider legal action—or worse. According to historian Louis Pizzitola, Hearst's political influence may have been crucial in the Federal Trade Commission's pursuit of Zukor on antitrust charges later that year, an investigation that would drag on for decades.<sup>77</sup> In any case, Hearst was certainly no help when the Arbuckle scandal broke later that year; indeed, the Hearst press led the campaign against Paramount's biggest star, an action that only added to Zukor's personal embarrassment and financial loss.

When Hearst left Select to establish Cosmopolitan, he abandoned the Talmadge studio and began looking for an impressive new home for his motion picture interests. His requirements were very different from those of Goldwyn or Selznick: he wanted a permanent site on which he could hang the name of his studio, and he did not want to have it in California. *The Dark Star* had been shot at the Paragon studio in Fort Lee in the summer of 1919, and that fall *The Miracle of Love*





George D. Baker directs Marion Davies and Anders Randolph in Cosmopolitan's *The Cinema Murder* (1919). Hal Rosson is at the camera. Museum of Modern Art/Film Stills Archive.

and *April Folly* were made at the Biograph studio in the Bronx.<sup>78</sup> By the end of the year Frank Borzage had been brought east to direct Frances Marion's adaptation of "Humoresque," a story by Fannie Hurst that had appeared in *Cosmopolitan* a few months earlier (a typical example of the synergy between Hearst's film business and his publishing interests). The tale of a young immigrant whose skill as a violinist enables his family to leave the ghetto for a more comfortable life uptown, then comes close to tragedy when he is wounded in the war, *Humoresque* (1920) became Cosmopolitan's first great critical and commercial success. Hearst's box-office instincts were quite good: he pressured Frances Marion into abandoning the original ambiguous ending and had her substitute an uplifting miracle instead. Although Fannie Hurst was initially indignant over such tampering, all was forgiven when the film won the *Photoplay* Gold Medal as the best picture of 1920, a significant accolade in the pre-Oscar era.<sup>79</sup>

While *Humoresque* was still in production, Hearst finally acquired the property he had been looking for. Sulzer's Harlem River Park and Casino, a once popular beer garden suffering from the effects of the Volstead Act, would become the new

Cosmopolitan-International studio. For \$600,000 Hearst took a multiyear lease on the property, which occupied the entire block between Second Avenue and the Harlem River, from 126th to 127th Street.<sup>80</sup> Hearst's reasons for establishing his studio in New York were much the same as those cited by Griffith, Selznick, and other local producers. "One of the most important of these is that the city is the center of stage play production," he later told one industry trade paper. "It is folly to minimize the screen's real need of the best artists on the stage in the casts of its worthwhile productions." For Hearst, even California's sunshine had little practical value. "We prefer to produce our pictures in studios with artificial lighting, rather than to depend on uncertainty and varying degrees of sunlight, a condition for which no part of the country is at all seasons exempt."<sup>81</sup>

Cosmopolitan would quickly become one of the most important production companies in New York, making some thirty-five features before Hearst permanently moved his operation to California in 1924. Selznick's approach had been to produce a large number of films at relatively low cost. Hearst made fewer films, but they were all first-class productions, sumptuously mounted by one of New York's greatest local talents, the architect and designer Joseph Urban. Trained in Vienna (where he had designed the city's new town hall and the Austrian pavilion for the 1904 St. Louis World's Fair), Urban had been working as a theatrical designer in America since 1912. Beginning in 1915, he had designed every edition of the *Ziegfeld Follies*, and he was the artistic director of the Metropolitan Opera from 1917 until his death in 1933. According to Leon Barsacq and Elliott Stein, Urban's accomplishments made him "the only designer working in US films in the early 20s whose name was a household word."<sup>82</sup> Some of Urban's architectural work still survives in New York, notably the Cosmopolitan building on Eighth Avenue and 57th Street (somewhat altered, but still recognizable) and the original portions of the New School for Social Research, with its phenomenal ovoid auditorium. Urban's greatest building, the Ziegfeld Theater on West 54th Street, was demolished in 1967.

In the popular imagination, Cosmopolitan's output in this period has been reduced to a series of overproduced Marion Davies costume spectacles. Even Hearst biographer W. A. Swanberg claims that "[o]ne of his biggest single losers was his motion pictures, largely because of his love of spectacle and his insistence on surrounding Miss Davies with perfection in every detail."<sup>83</sup> But Davies appeared in less than a third of the films produced by Cosmopolitan in this period, and only four of these could be described as costume pictures: *When Knighthood Was in Flower* (1922), *Little Old New York* (1923), *Yolanda* (1924), and *Janice Meredith* (1924). In fact, it was Urban who left the greatest mark on Cosmopolitan's output, not only designing all the films, but also choreographing the stage prologues that graced many of their first-run showings, decorating the interior of the Cosmopolitan Theater, and (in 1923) rebuilding the Cosmopolitan studio itself.

Urban was certainly the dominant creative talent during the studio's first few years, especially in light of the colorless directors Hearst chose to put under contract. A film like *Enchantment* (1921) is remembered today only because of Urban's art direction, said to be the first appearance of Secessionist-style modernism in an American film.<sup>84</sup> In fact, the directors were often the weakest links in these productions. Such journeymen as Robert Vignola, George D. Baker, Albert Capellani, and George Terwilliger directed nearly all the films at Cosmopolitan between the benchmark successes of *Humoresque* and *When Knighthood Was in Flower*. Frank Borzage, the only great director on the lot, did get to make three more films for Hearst in New York: the theatrical adaptation *Get-Rich-Quick Wallingford* (1921); *Back Pay* (1922), another Fannie Hurst/Frances Marion project (which this time retained the downbeat ending); and *The Good Provider* (1922), almost a remake of *Humoresque*, with much of the same cast. Why Borzage was the only one of this group never to work with Marion Davies is open to question; indeed, after *The Good Provider*, he ran out his Cosmopolitan contract with three more films made on the West Coast, as if trying to get as far away from Davies and Hearst as possible.

A look at *Beauty's Worth* (1922) suggests what Borzage was trying to distance himself from. Marion Davies plays a young innocent raised by a pair of Quaker aunts and is scorned as unfashionable by her foppish neighbors. Everyone winds up at a seaside hotel, where resident artist Cheyne Rovein (Forrest Stanley) is asked to stage a little pantomime for the amusement of the guests. He is so taken with the beauty of Marion Davies that he glorifies her in a mammoth three-part pageant right out of the *Ziegfeld Follies*. The film is great fun, but there is really nothing here beyond Hearst's completely transparent effort to present Marion Davies as the world's most desirable female. With the help of Joseph Urban's costumes and sets, he largely succeeds. Cinematographer Ira Morgan and Davies's favorite writer-director team of Luther Reed and Robert Vignola deliver just what the boss wanted. There is nothing of the subtlety or tenderness that Borzage wrings out of *Back Pay*, for example; but for the Davies films, Hearst was obviously after something very different.

Of course, most of the studio's films did not star Marion Davies but featured the other members of Cosmopolitan's stock company: Alma Rubens, Matt Moore, Seena Owen, and Lionel Barrymore. Indeed, the production schedule was so busy that, despite the size of his new facility, Hearst was constantly forced to rent space at other studios. Albert Capellani filmed all the "big interiors" for *The Inside of the Cup* (1920) at 127th Street, but the more intimate scenes were shot at Estee's studio, a minor rental facility at 361 West 125th Street.<sup>85</sup> Soon after, the entire production unit of *Buried Treasure* (1920) was sent to California, where it settled in at the Robert Brunton studio (although the real reason for the trip may have been to keep Marion Davies near at hand while Hearst indulged in a family vacation).<sup>86</sup> Frances Marion was allowed to direct *Just Around the Corner* (1921) in New York, but she had to rent

space at the old Metro studio on 61st Street.<sup>87</sup> Cosmopolitan even had to shoot two entire features, *Find the Woman* and *The Beauty Shop* (both 1921), at the small Long Island studio on Mill Street in Astoria.<sup>88</sup>

Because he did not regard his motion picture work as an investment, Hearst felt free to treat it all as a game. There was no need to account for the bottom line, and Hearst himself could dabble with each project in the same way he indulged his passion for collecting statuary. Swanberg recounts an October 1921 screening session on Hearst's yacht, the *Oneida*. Marion Davies, Luther Reed, William Le Baron (Cosmopolitan's "editorial director"), Joseph Urban and his daughter Gretl (who designed costumes for most of her father's period films), and a few Davies relatives were cruising in New York harbor, viewing rushes of their latest production. Suddenly Hearst announced that he had decided to continue sailing on to Mexico for a six-week inspection tour of his properties. As the boss was picking up all expenses (including a stop in Baltimore to outfit everyone for the journey), all on board thought this a great idea.<sup>89</sup> Hearst had work to do on the trip, but Le Baron, Urban, and Reed were key members of the studio executive hierarchy; pulling all of them away from their desks for six weeks must have brought activity in many departments to a dead halt.

When the travelers did return to 127th Street, they threw themselves into the production of their first elaborate costume spectacle, *When Knighthood Was in Flower*. Hearst had seen the success of Ernst Lubitsch's imported costume dramas, *Madame Dubarry* and *Anna Boleyn*, both of which were playing throughout the country in 1921. So was Douglas Fairbanks's *The Three Musketeers*, which was not only making money, but also (along with his earlier *The Mark of Zorro*) had succeeded in reinventing Fairbanks's screen persona. He had dropped the jazzy, Anita Loos-style urban comedies on which his popularity had been based and was now established as a hero of costume pictures. *Orphans of the Storm*, not yet released, had been New York's big production event of 1921, and on the West Coast, Fairbanks was about to begin work on *Robin Hood* (1922). Hearst's commercial instincts told him that now was the time to move Davies into this new genre of costume spectacle, which he hoped would also help establish a more effective (and appropriate) screen persona for her.

Robert E. Sherwood, then film critic for the old *Life* magazine, understood that *When Knighthood Was in Flower* (in which Davies plays Princess Mary Tudor) was a clear attempt to copy the success of *Madame Dubarry* (released in America as *Deception*). "Robert Vignola set his drama against this magnificent background, lighting it and reproducing it with real genius. He had evidently studied closely the methods of Ernst Lubitsch in *Deception*, a German film of the same [historical] period, and the influence of this fine production was evident throughout. The mobs were beautifully handled, and there was plenty of fast-moving action in the melodramatic

episodes.”<sup>90</sup> Today, the film could hardly be accused of moving too quickly, but the settings and costumes designed by Joseph and Gretl Urban are still astonishing. Prop man Arthur Scanlon worked closely with Urban and remembered having as many as one hundred men assigned to the property crew. Urban designed the sets at his home in Yonkers, and because the 127th Street studio did not have adequate construction shops, the preparation of various elements was assigned to crews working all over the city. Stonework segments of castle exteriors, for example, were modeled in clay by Scanlon, then cast as a mold in three-by-four-foot sections. The finished segments were made of plaster on burlap, backed with wooden frames.<sup>91</sup> Scanlon always insisted that the final effect, though time-consuming, was more satisfying than the plastic injection molding that replaced it years later. Sherwood was certainly impressed. “The scenes were constructed solidly,” he wrote, “so that they never appeared to be artificial studio sets. In fact, there was a semblance of authority about the whole picture.”<sup>92</sup> Some of this was due to Scanlon’s trickery, but it was no secret in the press that Hearst had decorated the sets with antiques from his own collections, selected from overstuffed Bronx warehouses.

So long as Hearst continued to base his operations in New York, he kept the Davies films in production at the 127th Street studio. But by 1922 directors Frank Borzage and E. Mason Hopper were making their Cosmopolitan films on the West Coast, and the New York studio began to concentrate on a smaller number of more elaborate productions. After the collapse of Selznick’s East Coast operation, director Alan Crosland was put under contract and assigned a bizarre Lionel Barrymore vehicle called *Enemies of Women* (1923). Based on a Blasco-Ibanez novel, the film tried very hard to repeat the success of Metro’s *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse*, substituting Barrymore as an émigré Russian in prewar Paris for the Argentine played by Valentino in the earlier hit. Because Valentino was a better dancer than Lionel Barrymore, that element was provided here by a bevy of Ziegfeld beauties, including “Dolores,” Jessie Reed, Helen Lee Worthing, and an anonymous “almost undraped” dancer (recently identified as Clara Bow), who all writhed to Rachmaninoff while the cameras rolled.<sup>93</sup> Urban’s fanciful “Russian” sets suggested nothing more authentic than the Russian Tea Room.

Most likely, the studio’s energies were focused instead on the current Davies picture, *Little Old New York*. Because Robert Vignola was off on a trip around the world “for the purpose of studying people and customs of other countries for use in [the] future,”<sup>94</sup> Hearst brought in the most prestigious freelance director in New York, Sidney Olcott. *Little Old New York* would be a Valentine to the city as it grew in size and power in the postcolonial era. Marion Davies starred as Patricia O’Day, an Irish immigrant who must masquerade as her own brother in order to obtain an inheritance. In the course of a very long film she encounters such famous nineteenth-century New Yorkers as Robert Fulton, Washington Irving, Cornelius Vanderbilt, John Jacob Astor, and the poet Fitz-Greene Halleck.



Unfortunately, Luther Reed produced an especially clumsy adaptation of the original play, and most of the first reel is spent in identifying all the characters in this vast historical panorama. But it was not just the opportunity to re-create the New York of a hundred years earlier that had attracted Hearst to the project. It was a convention of the Davies films that excuses should be found to dress Marion in men's clothing as often as possible, and in *Little Old New York* Davies plays in drag for most of the film (by comparison, there was only one such sequence in *When Knighthood Was in Flower*). The film's dramatic highlight occurs when "Patrick" is tied to a pillory and publicly flogged by Louis Wolheim, an angry prize-fighter known as the "Hoboken Terror." An attraction develops between Davies and her cousin (played by the very busy New York actor Harrison Ford), and the film has a lot of fun with Ford's efforts to overcome his feelings for his handsome young ward.

Olcott had completed about two-thirds of this peculiar film when, early on Sunday morning, February 18, 1923, a fire broke out in the driveway between the main studio building and a smaller storage facility. Within hours the entire studio was in ruins; everything on the main stage was burned up by the fire, and all the properties, costumes, and office areas were damaged or destroyed by water. All the positive prints in the building had been removed the night before, but firemen still had to save about forty reels of negative from *Little Old New York* and a number of unreleased Cosmopolitan productions. Along with all the sets for the film, the fire destroyed many valuable properties, including antique mantels and furnishings, Waterford glass chandeliers, and several vintage portrait paintings, including one valued at \$80,000.<sup>95</sup> Urban, whose personal research library had also been lost, quickly shifted production to Tec-Art's three local rental studios.

It was claimed that the fire would not delay release of the film, which was rushed to completion in time to open at the Cosmopolitan Theater on August 1. Once again, Urban's work earned special attention. "For costumes and settings and photography, *Little Old New York* is one of the most exquisite productions ever thrown upon a screen," reported the *New York Times*.<sup>96</sup> But to modern eyes, some scenes appear to be played before enormous painted backdrops, a cut-rate solution unknown in other Cosmopolitan productions, and very likely the result of pressures caused by the approaching premiere date. Audiences in 1923, however, had a very different experience of the film than we have today. In addition to Urban's redecoration of the theater itself, Hearst had brought in Victor Herbert to conduct the orchestra for the gala premiere. And as was the case with many prestigious releases in this period, first-run audiences were treated to elaborate color effects missing on surviving prints. Hearst had employed a hand colorist, Gustav Brock, to paint color highlights onto a limited number of prints for scenes showing the Stars and Stripes being raised over Robert Fulton's *Clermont* and a blush on Marion Davies's cheeks when, as "Patrick," she overhears a risqué story.<sup>97</sup>

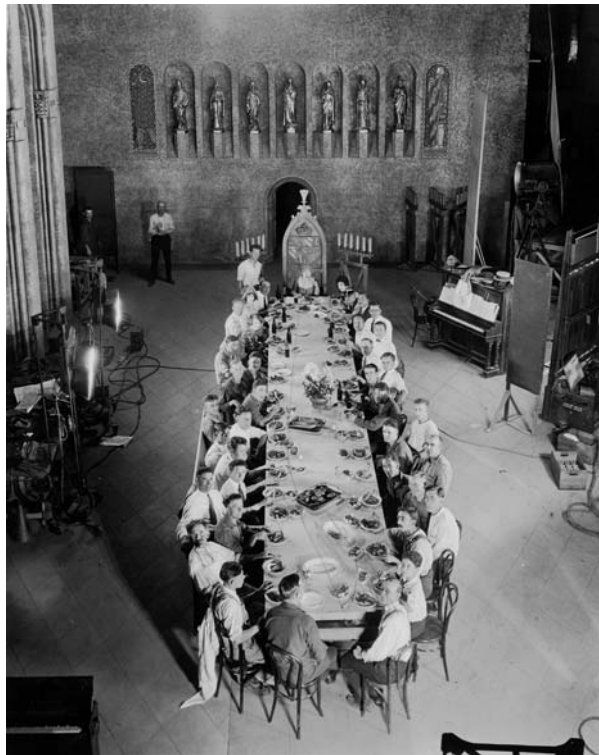


Although Hearst immediately acted to rebuild the 127th Street studio, the fire marked the beginning of Cosmopolitan's move from New York. On May 22 Hearst finally broke with Zukor and merged Cosmopolitan with the Goldwyn Pictures Corporation and Distinctive Pictures, Inc., intending to establish a production combine that would rival Famous Players-Lasky. The new firm, known as Goldwyn-Cosmopolitan, was capitalized at \$25 million, the largest portion of which was provided by Hearst.<sup>98</sup> Goldwyn contributed its large studio in Culver City and an extensive distribution chain, but direct access to theaters was still a problem.

Back in New York, Alan Crosland was forced to shoot *Under the Red Robe* (1923) in whatever armories or studios were available while the 127th Street studio was rebuilt. The noted Shakespearean actor Robert Mantell played Cardinal Richelieu, and William Powell was the villainous Duke of Orleans. Another lavish medieval epic, *Yolanda* (1924), in which Marion Davies starred as Princess Mary of Burgundy, had to be shot largely in the Jackson Avenue studio. An attempt to duplicate the success of *When Knighthood Was in Flower*, *Yolanda* was released at the tag end of the costume epic craze. Despite some of Joseph and Gretl Urban's most beautiful work, it died at the box office.

Soon after the release of *Yolanda*, Metro's Marcus Loew acquired Goldwyn-Cosmopolitan in a stock swap, changing its name to Metro-Goldwyn (Louis B.

Marion Davies, still costumed as Princess Mary of Burgundy, hosts the cast and crew of *Yolanda* on the set at the Tec-Art studio on Jackson Avenue in the Bronx. The setting suggests the great dining hall of the refectory at San Simeon, then still under construction. Museum of the Moving Image.



Mayer's name was added a bit later).<sup>99</sup> Hearst now had a major position in a vertically integrated film combine powerful enough to rival Zukor's operation, although Cosmopolitan itself existed only as a production company floating within the MGM orbit. At the same time, Hearst had been suffering serious political reverses in New York, and his fabulous ranch at San Simeon, under construction since 1919, was almost ready for occupancy.<sup>100</sup> He decided to move the film operation to California, where he would no longer have to worry about maintaining his own studio but could create a fiefdom for Marion Davies right on the MGM lot. But before leaving New York, he completed one last film, the Revolutionary War spectacle *Janice Meredith* (1924).

Considering that D. W. Griffith had already announced his own elaborate Revolutionary War picture, it seems odd that Hearst should set out to produce a similar film, one that would trail Griffith's into theaters by nearly six months. Both *America* and *Janice Meredith* (for which Hearst brought director E. Mason Hopper back from the West Coast) drew on the current colonial revival and the upcoming sesquicentennial of the American Revolution, and both restaged many of the same historic tableaux, including Valley Forge, Yorktown, and the Boston Tea Party. The *New York Times* admitted that Griffith's battle scenes and historical re-creations generally surpassed Hopper's work, but judged that both the story and the acting were superior in *Janice Meredith*.<sup>101</sup> But critics immediately noticed that the finest historical re-creation in *Janice Meredith* was an episode that was *not* in the Griffith film, Washington's crossing of the Delaware. Film historians have long assumed that this was no coincidence, and that in return for a free hand with this one sequence, "the Hearst papers extravagantly promoted and endorsed *America* when it was released."<sup>102</sup>

The sequence was certainly worth the effort Cosmopolitan put into it. A large portion of eighteenth-century Trenton was re-created at Plattsburg, New York, with forty-six houses constructed on two large streets, each 800 feet long. The neighboring Saranac River had frozen to such a depth that demolition crews, led by local explosives expert "Dynamite George" Cline, had to blast out an 800 × 600-foot channel to film the crossing. Fourteen hundred extras were recruited from local towns and military bases, and anyone who could be induced to "fall" into the icy water for five or ten minutes earned an additional \$100.<sup>103</sup>

Although Griffith strived for accuracy, Hearst's film was, if anything, even more like a textbook account of the war. At times even Davies gets lost in this canvas, in an underwritten part that has her popping up conveniently at all the key historic moments. Although the art direction is credited to Joseph Urban, trade press accounts published early in the shooting indicate that Everett Shinn was engaged as the film's art director when Urban was put to work on Cosmopolitan's next production.<sup>104</sup> The detail of these interiors also impressed the *Times*, which sent a reporter to describe Hopper's work at the rented Jackson Avenue studio in the Bronx.<sup>105</sup> In fact, production sprawled over nearly every available studio in the city, including



For *Janice Meredith* (1924), Hearst's camera crews filmed Washington's crossing of the Delaware on the frozen Saranac River at Plattsburg. Bison Archives.

the Jackson, Biograph, Pathé, Tilford, and "Fort Lee" studios, as well as the "newly constructed Cosmopolitan Studio at 127th Street."<sup>106</sup>

Today, *Janice Meredith* is remembered for the first appearance in features of W. C. Fields, playing a bit part as a drunken British officer vamped by Marion Davies (who had worked with him during their *Follies* days). But the film is actually one of the better Davies spectacles, balancing costumes, scenery, thousands of extras, historic re-creations, comic episodes, and a very respectable performance from the star. It would be interesting to see it in its original form, but *Janice Meredith* survives only in a recut version called *The Beautiful Rebel*, prepared for British audiences and shortened by almost twenty-five minutes. Given Hearst's notorious anti-British sensibilities, one suspects that any real bite the film may have had was considerably compromised. As Paul Revere rides off to warn the inhabitants of every Middlesex village and farm, the best cry he can muster is, "The soldiers are coming!" Griffith, an Anglophile who produced propaganda films for the British government during the war, must have had quite a different take on these same events. But because all prints of *America* also descend from a cut-down British release (called *Love and Sacrifice*), no one can know for sure.

By the time *Janice Meredith* was released, Hearst and Cosmopolitan were already established on the West Coast. Ironically, the company's first big production was another nostalgic homage to bygone New York, *Lights of Old Broadway* (1925), staged on the MGM lot at Culver City. But no sooner had Hearst abandoned New York than an even larger company, First National, startled the industry by announcing it would relocate its main production unit there.

### First National Comes East

The original function of First National had been to provide a channel through which exhibitors could deal directly with top box-office attractions like Chaplin, Pickford, and Griffith. When this initial group split off to form United Artists, a raft of independent producers rushed to fill the void—in exchange for First National's upfront distribution guarantee. Thomas Ince, Louis B. Mayer, and Samuel Goldwyn were some of the West Coast producers associated with First National in the early 1920s; in the East, Whitman Bennett, Joseph Schenck, and Richard Barthelmess (Inspiration Pictures) also released their films this way. But because this system put the exhibitors who owned First National at the mercy of a cadre of uncontrollable independent producers, the franchise holders brought in Richard Rowland, the former head of Metro, to establish a meaningful production program of their own.<sup>107</sup>

Rowland was hired in October 1922 and by the following year had helped organize a production center for First National at the United studios in Hollywood. Goldwyn and Schenck would now make their films here, and so would First National's own production units. But when Rowland returned from an inspection tour of the West Coast early in 1924, he announced that he hoped to relocate all but one of First National's producing units to New York. "It is quite all right for individual producers like Ince or Joe Schenck, who make a few pictures a year, to live and work on the Coast," he told reporters. "But for the producer who has headquarters in New York, it is all wrong. You cannot make your product 3,500 miles away from the home office with that degree of efficiency and economy necessary to success, as when you have your organization close at hand. The hero worship, the mutual admiration society which exists in a small place like Hollywood, would not exist here."<sup>108</sup>

Within months Rowland had leased the Bronx Biograph studio as First National's new home. Earl Hudson and Marion Fairfax, who had been production manager and editorial director on the West Coast, arrived in October with a staff of sixty-five technicians and began renovating the old studio for the use of Milton Sills and Doris Kenyon.<sup>109</sup> As the *New York Times* noted with some surprise, this was "the first removal of a motion picture corporation from Hollywood to New York."<sup>110</sup> Local industry analysts were delighted. The *Film Daily* reported that eastern production

was at its highest peak since 1920, while both *Barron's* and the *Wall Street Journal* predicted that “the motion picture business of the next decade will be mostly in sight of the tower of the Woolworth building.”<sup>111</sup>

Hudson brought with him a Hollywood art director, Milton Menasco (who had designed several impressive Maurice Tourneur films, including *Lorna Doone*), and two experienced cameramen, Arthur Edeson and James Van Trees. Edeson had worked in the East before, but for the last several years had been shooting Douglas Fairbanks costume epics in California. Van Trees was a Hollywood veteran who had worked for many years with director William Desmond Taylor. By bringing out West Coast technicians with whom he was already familiar, Hudson was able to hit the ground running; his first New York picture, *As Man Desires* (1925), was in the theaters in less than three months. Eventually, he was able to work local cameraman George Folsey into the mix, but for the most part Hudson saw the New York studio as a turn-key operation staffed almost entirely with West Coast personnel. Of course, there were some exceptions. Even if Menasco designed the films, decoration of the sets was clearly a local problem. The studio hired Bryant “Red” Farley and sent out a press release describing his qualifications, a document that makes him sound more like Harpo Marx than a conventional set decorator: “For nine years Farley has been going about from one New York studio to another. He is different from all other property men in that he supplies his own ‘props.’ He carries, among other things, a dozen collapsible chairs, a wedding ring, all sorts of ‘prop’ jewelry, sponges, tea and dog biscuits, pipes, garters, ropes, chains, shoe polish, and a chemical fire extinguisher—to mention a few items.”<sup>112</sup>

Although press reports had suggested that First National’s top stars, Colleen Moore and Corinne Griffith, would also move their operations to New York, this never happened. Hudson had to make due with First National’s second-tier attractions, and within a few months Ben Lyon and Dorothy Mackaill joined Kenyon and Sills in the Bronx. Between October 1924 and April 1926, when he was called back to the West Coast, Hudson produced seventeen program features at what was now called the First National–Biograph studio. Most of these were inauspicious society melodramas, although surviving documentation suggests that *Chickie* (1925), with Dorothy Mackaill, and Doris Kenyon’s *The Half-Way Girl* (1925) may have had a bit more grit than the Talmadge or Swanson films on which they were modeled.

Along with these stars, Hudson also brought the production unit that had been laboring on First National’s most ambitious project, an effects-driven fantasy spectacle called *The Lost World* (1925). Art director Milton Menasco and special effects technicians Willis O’Brien and Ralph Hammeras completed the last months of postproduction on the film in the Bronx, then began preliminary work on their next project, an underwater fantasy to be called *Atlantis*, for which location work was to have begun in the Azores early in 1925.<sup>113</sup> But *Atlantis* was never made, and the lackluster films that Hudson did shoot in New York only served to shore up the



bottom of First National's annual product line. While the West Coast units worked under the direction of men like George Fitzmaurice and John Stahl, Hudson had to make do with John F. Dillon, Lambert Hillyer, and George Archainbaud.

In September 1925 Richard Rowland announced that production at both the West and East Coast studios would be expanded and that screenwriters Jane Murn and Olga Printzlau would be added to the staff in New York. But even as Rowland renewed the lease on the Biograph studio, First National began planning the construction of a \$1.5 million studio in Burbank.<sup>114</sup> In April 1926 Hudson returned to the West Coast and was replaced in New York by producer Ray Rockett, whose brother A. L. Rockett was already serving as the eastern studio's general business manager.<sup>115</sup> The Rocketts were famous in the industry for their independent production of *Abraham Lincoln* (1924), a sleeper success that had made a lot of money for First National. They took over the existing production units at the Bronx studio and quickly made five more films before First National moved to centralize all its production in Burbank.

The fact that the Rocketts were independent producers, and not studio employees like Hudson (whose credit read "supervised by," not "presented by"), meant that they could afford more time and attention for the creation of each film. To give their films a bit more character they incorporated as much local color as possible, shooting parts of *Just Another Blonde* (1926) at Coney Island and *Subway Sadie* (1926) near Cleopatra's Needle in Central Park. For *Puppets* (1926), they used New York's Italian puppet theater as a background, not only employing Remo Bufano's famous puppets in the film, but also bringing "real Italians" to the Bronx studio as extras.<sup>116</sup> Technical credits on the Rockett films were also impressive: Al Santell and Irvin Willat were brought in to direct, with Charles Van Enger and Arthur Edeson behind the cameras.<sup>117</sup> The Rocketts also had the wit to improve First National's own talent roster by borrowing up-and-coming Louise Brooks from Paramount for *Just Another Blonde*.<sup>118</sup> But when work on *The Perfect Sap* (1927) wrapped in the summer of 1926, First National quietly let its lease on the Biograph studio expire.<sup>119</sup>

### Kane at Cosmopolitan

As already noted, First National acquired most of its product by contracting with an array of independent producers, a group whose numbers were constantly shifting according to the fortunes of the industry. At the same time that Earl Hudson was grinding out First National's own films at the Biograph studio, the company continued to distribute the Richard Barthelmess films being shot at Tec-Art. In 1925 First National signed up yet another New York producer, Robert T. Kane, who had been in charge of production at Paramount's Astoria studio between 1921 and 1924. It was Kane who had put that studio on a paying basis at a time when there had



been significant pressure to abandon it. In a game of musical chairs, he had been replaced by William Le Baron, who had moved over from Hearst's Cosmopolitan studio. Kane then formed a partnership with director Henry King and produced (in California) two Alice Terry films, *Sackcloth and Scarlet* (1925) and *Any Woman* (1925), which were distributed by Paramount.<sup>120</sup> On signing with First National he returned to New York and established Robert T. Kane Productions at William Randolph Hearst's old studio on 127th Street.

After the fire, Hearst rebuilt the Cosmopolitan studio so lavishly that it could be advertised as "the largest and best equipped motion picture plant in the East."<sup>121</sup> Although Paramount's enormous main stage was still the biggest, Cosmopolitan offered four immense stages covering between 10,400 and 15,600 square feet each. Paramount could handle 12,000 amps of electrical current, but Cosmopolitan was rated at 38,000, with another 12,000 in reserve.<sup>122</sup> The facility also boasted a 30 × 70-foot pool, thirty-two dressing rooms, and "executive offices suitable for four companies." All that was needed was someone to make films there. It is unclear why First National, when it came to New York in 1924, chose the much smaller Biograph studio as its base of operations when the renovated Cosmopolitan was already available. Perhaps the Metro-Goldwyn forces with which Hearst was now associated were loathe to turn it over to so strong a competitor and were more comfortable dealing with smaller fish like Sam E. Rork, another First National supplier, who shot *Clothes Make the Pirate* (1925) at Cosmopolitan just before Kane moved

New York studios all suffered from the lack of Hollywood-sized back lots, with predictable results. First National built this South Seas village at the Cosmopolitan studio on 127th Street for *Paradise* (1926). Bison Archives.



in.<sup>123</sup> Or perhaps Hearst had not yet made a firm decision to abandon New York and preferred to keep his options open while testing the waters at MGM's Culver City studio. Indeed, *Variety* did not announce Hearst's formal abandonment of the 127th Street studio until December 17, 1924.<sup>124</sup>

One of the first things Kane did when he returned to New York was to offer an annual \$5,000 endowment "for a university chair in motion picture learning as a step toward attracting to the industry college graduates trained in various branches of picture making."<sup>125</sup> He limited the offer to Harvard, Yale, Princeton, Columbia, and the universities of California, Pennsylvania, Wisconsin, and Chicago. But even though Frances Taylor Patterson was running an active "photoplay analysis" program at Columbia, just across town from the Cosmopolitan studio, neither she nor anyone else appears to have taken him up on the offer.<sup>126</sup>

Kane made an initial group of seven features at Cosmopolitan in 1925–1926, often starring underutilized First National contractees like Ben Lyon and Dorothy Mackaill, sometimes joined by Aileen Pringle, Blanche Sweet, or Lowell Sherman (for *The Great Deception* [1926] Kane even had Basil Rathbone in one of his few silent films). The production unit was very tight. Robert M. Haas (who also served as corporate treasurer) designed every film, and all were photographed by Ernest Haller, a great East Coast cameraman whose later Hollywood credits included *Gone with the Wind* (1939) and *Rebel without a Cause* (1955). Most of the films were directed by the little-known Howard Higgin, but Kane managed to get one of First National's best directors, Al Santell, for *Bluebeard's Seven Wives* (1926) and *The Dancer of Paris* (1926). And German director Lothar Mendes made his first American film for Kane, *The Prince of Tempters* (1926), with Lya de Putti. (As if to underscore how cozy the unit actually was, while Mendes was in New York he married Dorothy Mackaill.) Generating one feature every five weeks or so, Kane's unit had plenty of elbow room in the gigantic Hearst studio.

When Kane went on hiatus in the summer of 1926, Gloria Swanson moved in with her first United Artists production, *The Love of Sunya* (1927). Swanson wanted to continue working in New York and may have been led to the Cosmopolitan studio by Kane himself, whom she knew from his days at Astoria (it was Kane who introduced her to Joseph P. Kennedy).<sup>127</sup> Unfortunately, production of *The Love of Sunya*, which dragged on from September through December, proved extremely difficult. Swanson was now in full charge of her own company but had no relevant management experience and no partners with whom she might share some of the responsibility. Mary Pickford and Norma Talmadge were also the nominal heads of their own production companies, but these women were much better advised than Swanson, who was soon drowning in legal and administrative details.<sup>128</sup>

Swanson had left Paramount to escape the conventional costume romances that Jesse Lasky had concocted for her, but because of her own insecurity as a producer, *The Love of Sunya* was no improvement. A remake of a Clara Kimball Young vehicle

called *Eyes of Youth* (1919), the film offered Swanson not only a fashionable “spiritualist” setting but also the opportunity to wear a series of glamorous gowns, to be designed by her Parisian discovery, René Hubert. To direct, she brought in the man who made the original film, Albert Parker, reasoning that he already knew the material and would not waste a lot of time. But Parker had done all he could with it in 1919 and turned out a film that was excessively slow and stately. Swanson did make one bold gesture in hiring Dudley Murphy to produce the visual effects for the film, but even this decision worked against her. Murphy had just returned from Paris with a print of the short experimental film *Ballet mécanique* (1924), which he had made with the artists Fernand Léger and Man Ray.<sup>129</sup> The film caused a bit of a stir, and Swanson thought that Murphy was just the man to create some startling avant-garde effects for her spiritualism scenes. But after weeks of effort, Murphy was unable to deliver anything acceptable, and Swanson was forced to bring in “a Russian aircraft designer” to solve the film’s technical problems.<sup>130</sup> *The Love of Sunya* opened the new Roxy Theatre on March 11, 1927, but Swanson, reasoning that she needed all the technical and administrative support she could muster, had already moved her production company to the West Coast.

By the time Swanson left, rumors were swirling in all directions. In November 1926 it was reported that the Shuberts were going to take over, intending to use the studio not for making movies but as a theatrical warehouse. By January the deal was off.<sup>131</sup> Then it was announced that Chaplin would “definitely” complete *The Circus* at Cosmopolitan.<sup>132</sup> Although the actor did spend a considerable amount of time in New York that year because of legal problems, he made no films there. In the end, Robert T. Kane was alone in the studio once again.

Within a few months, he would have the entire city to himself. By the end of 1926, First National’s main unit had returned to the West Coast. Barthelmess, Hearst, Griffith, Talmadge, and Selznick were gone. Allan Dwan was finishing up at the Fox studio, and Paramount was about to go into mothballs. The industry analysts who had promoted New York so passionately in 1924 found other things to write about. In April 1927, when Frank Capra arrived to direct the last of Kane’s films, *For the Love of Mike*, production manager Leland Hayward could promise him reams of free publicity: “Only one film being made in New York—ours—and we’ll grab all the space.”<sup>133</sup>

Hayward was a new addition to the Kane unit, which still depended on cinematographer Ernest Haller, production designer Robert Haas, and such familiar East Coast actors as Ben Lyon, Dorothy Mackaill, Lois Wilson, and Mary Brian. Hayward, eager to involve himself in every level of the operation (Capra claimed he had even rewritten the script), would soon make a name for himself in the industry as a powerful agent and theatrical producer. Was it Hayward who was responsible for signing rising stars Barbara Stanwyck and Sylvia Sydney, and casting both of them

in their first film, *Broadway Nights* (1927)?<sup>134</sup> Was he behind the signing of Claudette Colbert for the starring role in the Capra picture, when she had only the Broadway success of *The Barker* behind her?

In any case, there was certainly a new interest in theatrical subjects, not only in *Broadway Nights* but also in *Dance Magic* (1927), which took audiences “from sumptuous Fifth Avenue apartments to unpretentious boarding houses on the east side; from tiny nightclubs to the biggest revue on Broadway; from Wall Street to the Bronx and Harlem.” Promoting the film in much the same manner that *The Naked City* was sold twenty years later, First National boasted that “[j]ust how New York policemen conduct a ‘third degree’ in investigating murder is graphically depicted in *Dance Magic*.”<sup>135</sup> For *High Hat* (1927), the setting was a movie company called “Superba-Prettygood Pictures.” Lucien Prival played a Stroheimesque director, with Osgood Perkins as his assistant and Ben Lyon as a lazy extra. The Hearst studio must have provided a suitably impressive backdrop. Although recently renovated as a state-of-the-art facility, it still had the gloomy aspect of a prison compound. Years later Capra would remember it as “cold and clammy as the catacombs . . . right in the middle of the uptown slums . . . a labyrinth of Macbethian halls and stairways.”<sup>136</sup>

Perhaps the most peculiar film produced by Kane at Cosmopolitan was *Convoy* (1927), a naval epic made for him by Victor and Edward Halperin, an enterprising team of local low-budget producers. The Halperins had acquired some footage of the British fleet at the Battle of Jutland and concocted a spy story for Lowell Sherman and Dorothy Mackaill that would allow them to give the material an American twist. At the film’s climax Dorothy Mackaill is mistakenly arrested for soliciting sailors at the Brooklyn Navy Yard and sentenced to a year at Blackwell’s Island.<sup>137</sup> The film’s own publicity ignored the story and focused instead on the work of Kane’s general manager, William Werner, who apparently did his best to make life at the Harlem studio as pleasant as possible: “He has a morning paper placed in each actor’s dressing room with the page turned to a cartoon, a magazine with some amusing anecdote or drawing, or in the case of the stars, a new and catchy record for the portable victrolas that are part of the furnishings of the star dressing rooms.”<sup>138</sup> It was Leland Hayward who was responsible for writing and planting such material.

In the end, Kane was unable to avoid one of the most familiar hazards of independent production: by the time the last film on his contract was due to go before the cameras, he had already spent all the allotted funds on the earlier pictures. As Frank Capra arrived in New York, Kane was about to leave the country on a “get-away-from-the mess trip,” leaving the whole situation in the hands of Leland Hayward. According to Capra’s account, money was so scarce that the actors began to demand cash payment in advance every morning, and he himself never received his \$400 fee for directing.<sup>139</sup> *For the Love of Mike* combined a comic Jewish-Irish rivalry with the background of a college picture, and Capra spliced in footage of the 1927

Harvard-Yale regatta, which had been shot at New Haven by another director.<sup>140</sup> Capra regarded the film as a “big flop” that nearly sank his career, and Claudette Colbert was so angry about it that Capra was surprised when she agreed to let him direct her again a few years later in *It Happened One Night* (1934).<sup>141</sup>

### The City as Exotic Location

Oddly enough, the few First National productions of this period best remembered for their New York atmosphere are not the films actually made there by Earl Hudson or the Rockett brothers. Occasional films produced at their West Coast studios required New York backgrounds, so production units would simply be sent east for a few days or weeks of shooting (and a paid vacation for the directors and stars). Throughout the two-year period that First National had its own studio in New York, stars from the West Coast were continually turning up on these junkets, filming key location scenes at subway stations and Fifth Avenue bus lines.



Concealing their camera in the back of a wagon, cinematographer Al Ligouri and director Tom Terriss prepare to film Cosmopolitan's *Boomerang Bill* on the streets of New York, 1922.



Corinne Griffith (who until 1922 had been one of New York's most active stars) returned in June 1925 to shoot exteriors for *Classified*. Police had to be called out to control the crowds that gathered around the location, a subway entrance on West 66th Street.<sup>142</sup> Griffith returned again the next summer for *Syncopating Sue* (1926), in which she played a pianist in a music store. According to the film's press book, it was she who insisted that the company travel to New York to shoot scenes of Tom Moore jumping into the Hudson River.<sup>143</sup> Probably the best known of First National's "New York" films is *Orchids and Ermine* (1927), a frequently revived Colleen Moore production. But only "a brief stay" was required to film the New York scenes; the bulk of the picture was shot in Burbank.<sup>144</sup> "Working girl" comedies like *Orchids and Ermine*, in which Moore played a hotel telephone operator, were becoming quite popular by the mid-1920s. Brief location scenes for such films could just as easily have been set (and shot) in Boston or Chicago. But even when no studio was available, Hollywood screenwriters continued to write in New York for the part.

Such location episodes may have been a tribute to the city's unrivaled status as a tourist attraction, but the films involved have little or nothing to do with the history of New York's indigenous motion picture industry. For the most part, Hollywood filmmakers would come east with their own key technical personnel, set up in front of a few familiar landmarks, and try to shoot as many scenes as possible before the crowds got out of hand. The vogue for location filming that had developed by the mid-1920s was encouraged by improvements in technology and transportation, which allowed Hollywood filmmakers to shoot everywhere from San Francisco to Samoa. In such a context, New York was just another exotic location, on a par with Niagara Falls or the Grand Canyon. Nothing was required of its creative personnel, and nothing was left behind when the visiting crews returned to Hollywood. This was a bad precedent that would haunt the local film industry for decades.

One of the strangest examples of this type of hit-and-run production was James Cruze's *Hollywood* (1923). The film was a satire of the movie colony and featured many stars in bit parts and cameos, from Pola Negri to "Fatty" Arbuckle. In order to take advantage of the stars based in New York, Cruze had a vast railroad station set constructed at Paramount's Astoria studio and filmed a single episode there with Thomas Meighan, Hope Hampton, Lila Lee, Agnes Ayres, Mary Astor, Will Rogers, and various others. Cruze "left the Eastern Studio staff gasping in amazement and gasping for breath" at the way he breezed in and out of town in one day on this assignment.<sup>145</sup>

In fact, Paramount actually did very little of this during the silent era, realizing that if a film called for any New York sequences at all, they might just as well shoot the entire picture at the studio in Astoria. Universal and MGM, which did not operate studios of their own in the East, were much more likely to resort to the use of location units in such instances. In February 1925 Universal reopened its Fort Lee studio on an experimental basis for the production of *Little Giant* (1926), using a



Broadway star, Glenn Hunter, and the local director-cameraman team of William Nigh and Sid Hickox.<sup>146</sup> Although the experiment was said to have been a success, Universal did not continue to work at the Fort Lee studio, choosing instead to send out location units from the West Coast whenever local color seemed necessary. The most elaborate of these expeditions was Harry Pollard's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* company, which traveled throughout the country in 1926 in search of authentic locations. Pollard and his crew spent an incredibly bitter winter in Plattsburg, New York, filming "Eliza crossing the ice" on the same spot where Washington had crossed the Delaware in *Janice Meredith*. After weeks of freezing temperatures (sometimes reaching thirty-seven degrees below zero), Pollard was hospitalized with blood poisoning and influenza, production shut down, and the sequence had to be shot at Universal City.<sup>147</sup>

In the summer of 1928 alone, Universal had at least three companies working in New York. William Wyler used hidden cameras to film scenes for *Anybody Here Seen Kelly?* the story of an Irish traffic cop tracked down by a French girl he had known in the war. Wyler enclosed the camera in a laundry pushcart for scenes shot in front of the Metropolitan Museum and later was nearly arrested for jamming traffic at 42nd Street and Broadway.<sup>148</sup> *The Girl on the Barge* was something very different, a languorous tale of life on the Erie Canal directed by Edward Sloman and starring Jean Hersholt and Sally O'Neil. Most of the film was actually shot on the Barge Canal between New York City and Whitehall, cover sets were built at the Paramount Astoria studio, and an unconvincing storm sequence was created in miniature on the West Coast.<sup>149</sup> *The Cohens and the Kellys in Atlantic City* began shooting at that location on August 6, 1928, but by the time it was released the following spring, the studio had taken the originally silent film and inserted some dialogue sequences filmed at Universal City.<sup>150</sup> In fact, all three of these films had so-called goat gland talking sequences added to them before release to invigorate their box-office potential.

*This Is Heaven*, a silent picture that Samuel Goldwyn began filming in New York in November 1928, suffered a similar fate. At that time many New York studios were already shooting talkies, and every first-run theater on Broadway was advertising some kind of "sound." But Goldwyn's film starred Vilma Banky, a Hungarian actress whose command of the English language was rudimentary (a problem she shared with Pola Negri, Emil Jannings, and other imported stars). Her talkie debut was pushed as far into the future as possible, making *This Is Heaven* probably the last silent film to go before the cameras in New York. Banky played a young Hungarian immigrant tossing flapjacks at Child's restaurant, and Goldwyn's idea was to shoot a few talkie sequences later in Hollywood, hoping that the story would excuse the thickness of her accent.<sup>151</sup> The project was doomed from the start. Banky's co-star, Robert Montgomery, was publicly fired (this would have been his first film), and

James Hall was sent out from the West Coast to replace him.<sup>152</sup> Goldwyn could not decide whether the talking sequences would help the picture or push it under, and by the time he released the film nationally in May 1929, its status as a part-talkie made it little more than an oddity.

MGM's work in New York was considerably more ambitious. Early in 1927 King Vidor spent five weeks there shooting exteriors for *The Crowd*, one of the masterworks of late silent screen naturalism. In his autobiography, Vidor admitted that the stylized decor of many of the sets constructed back at Culver City had been influenced by the work of such German directors as Fritz Lang and F. W. Murnau. But while shooting in New York, he was closer to the techniques pioneered by Erich von Stroheim, whose *Greed* (1924) had been filmed on location in San Francisco and Death Valley. "For scenes of the sidewalks of New York, we designed a pushcart perambulator carrying what appeared to be inoffensive packing boxes," he remembered. "Inside the hollowed-out boxes there was room for one small-sized cameraman and one silent camera. We pushed this contraption from the Bowery to Times Square and no one ever detected our subterfuge."<sup>153</sup> Vidor's cameraman, Henry Sharp, spent much of his time in the city studying the Rembrandts in the Metropolitan Museum. But if he looked to the past for inspiration, he made sure that his tools were completely up to date. Sharp claimed to be using "the widest angle lens ever used in motion picture work," one so rapid that it even allowed him to shoot in the "dark and narrow streets abutting on lower Broadway."<sup>154</sup> Developed for newsreel work, such technology proved indispensable for moving production out of the Hollywood stages and onto the streets of cities like New York, creating the same aura of authenticity that audiences had already come to associate with the newsreel.

One reason that Vidor and Sharp seem to have had so little trouble filming in New York is that the star of *The Crowd*, James Murray, was an unknown player. The situation was completely different the following year, when MGM sent Buster Keaton to New York to film key sequences for *The Cameraman* (1928). Keaton was mobbed wherever he went, and the police were unable to control traffic or unruly crowds.<sup>155</sup> Keaton played an old-fashioned photographer of sidewalk tintypes who wants to impress his girl by becoming a stringer for the Hearst newsreel. Although he took the trouble of hiding his cameras behind the drawn curtains of a large limousine, Keaton could not hide himself. "The first shot we attempted in New York was one of me, carrying my tintype camera, crossing the trolley tracks at Fifth Avenue and 23rd Street," he recalled in his autobiography. "As I was doing this, the motorman stopped his trolley in the middle of the crossing and yelled, 'Hey, Keaton!' His passengers looked out of the windows and also began to shout things at me. In no time at all I was surrounded by so many people that the nearest cop couldn't even get near me."<sup>156</sup> The result was instant gridlock on 23rd Street, Broadway, and



Harold Lloyd's 1927 production of *Speedy* was one of the most successful examples of Hollywood's use of New York as an exotic location. Bison Archives.

Fifth Avenue. He had the same problem later that day down at the Battery. In the finished film the real New York appears in only a few brief shots: Keaton playing every position in an eerily depopulated Yankee Stadium; Keaton sprinting up Fifth Avenue at 56th Street (an especially empty Sunday morning, apparently); one scene in the lobby of the Ambassador Hotel, Keaton's New York headquarters; and a bit involving a hansom cab in Central Park. The rest of the film was shot in and around Los Angeles, with the amusement park at Venice doubling for Coney Island.<sup>157</sup>

Keaton knew that Harold Lloyd had been able to film much of *Speedy* on location in Manhattan the year before and probably assumed that if Lloyd could get away with it, so could he. But Lloyd's production unit was famous for its organizational skills and had worked out the film in great detail even before they left Hollywood. When Lloyd and his company arrived in New York in the summer of 1927, they built sets in "the erstwhile FP-L studio," empty because of its recent closure by Paramount (which was set to distribute Lloyd's film).<sup>158</sup> But even Lloyd had problems filming in Times Square. He fixed up a laundry wagon with a pair of concealed cameras, but then found his parking spot taken: despite police cooperation, it had

been usurped by a pair of plainclothes detectives on a stakeout. A second attempt failed when a vagrant began harassing the actor playing a traffic cop. "The efforts to get rid of her tipped off the crowd and made any further attempt impossible that day, so the bit was put aside to be photographed in Los Angeles," Lloyd wrote in his autobiography.<sup>159</sup>

In *Speedy*, Lloyd plays a baseball-obsessed New Yorker so preoccupied with the game that he is unable to hold down a permanent job. Because he drives a taxi for much of the film, Lloyd was able to incorporate far more location footage than can be found in most other silent-era New York productions. The company shot on Wall Street, beneath the 59th Street Bridge, at Coney Island, and in front of the Plaza Hotel. With "Babe" Ruth as his fare, Harold goes off on a wild ride to Yankee Stadium, where he stays to watch the Bambino play.<sup>160</sup> According to Lloyd,

All of the baseball and Subway, virtually all of the taxi and Coney Island, and much of the horse-car [material] were made in New York and the picture completed in the studio and on location on the Coast. On undeveloped acreage we own in Westwood Hills we built a replica of the Sheridan Square neighborhood on the lower west side of Manhattan. Some of the picture was taken in the true Sheridan Square, some of it in this California reproduction, and it will take a 20-20 eye to tell them apart in the film.<sup>161</sup>

For films like these, King Vidor and Harold Lloyd wanted more of New York than just an occasional colorful insert, and so they pioneered the integration of extensive New York location footage within an essentially Hollywood production. But even as these films were being shot on the streets of New York, new technologies developed in local studios were producing the first commercially viable talking pictures. The coming of sound and the economics of filmmaking during the 1930s temporarily put a stop to such location shooting. But after World War II, films like *On the Town* (1949) successfully revived the use of New York as Hollywood's favorite urban backdrop, a tradition that has co-existed with indigenous New York production ever since.

A Vitaphone crew working at Oscar  
Hammerstein's Manhattan Opera House  
films Anna Case in *La Fiesta*, July 10, 1926.  
Bison Archives.





# 5

## Edison's Dream

### Talking Pictures

When Thomas Edison notified the U.S. Patent Office in 1888 that he was working on a motion picture invention, he described it as “an instrument which does for the Eye what the phonograph does for the Ear.” Edison had not been trying to invent silent movies; what he really wanted was to create a new audiovisual medium that combined music, motion photography, and projected-picture entertainment. “Thus, if one wished to hear and see the concert or the opera, it would only be necessary to sit down at home, look upon a screen and see the performance, reproduced exactly in every movement and at the same time the voices of the players and singers, the music of the orchestra, the various sounds that accompany a performance of this sort, will be reproduced exactly. The end attained is a perfect illusion,” he told a Canadian reporter in 1895.<sup>1</sup>

At the Black Maria studio in West Orange, New Jersey, Edison's assistant W.K.L. Dickson had recently completed a forty-five-second film in which he played the violin while two other laboratory technicians danced.<sup>2</sup> But mechanical problems involving the synchronization of image and sound proved more difficult to solve than Edison had expected. When he placed this new invention on the market in 1895, synchronization of the phonograph cylinder with the film loop in the Kinetoscope cabinet was not even attempted. In fact, exhibitors could choose which military march or popular ballad would accompany the brief vignettes dancing in their Kinetoscopes. Audiences were unimpressed, and only forty-five “Kinetophones” had been manufactured by 1900.<sup>3</sup>



Perhaps one reason the Kinetophone failed so completely in 1895 was that it had been released in competition with the first projected motion pictures. Peepshow viewing was no longer at the cutting edge of technology, a fact that Edison's simple background music was unable to disguise. Other inventors continued to pursue Edison's dream, synchronizing operatic arias, comedy skits, and military drills with varying degrees of precision. At the International Exposition in Paris in 1900, audiences enjoyed Gaumont's Chronophone films of Sarah Bernhardt, Gabrielle Réjane, and Benoît-Constant Coquelin. Oskar Messter's Biophon productions were among the first German films to be screened around the world. Britain offered the Vivaphone, while in America the Cinephone, Picturephone, and Cameraphone all tried for a piece of the elusive talking-film market.<sup>4</sup>

"In producing a talking picture where several actors are involved," David Hulfish wrote in 1911, "the method of manufacture is to make the talking record first, and then fit a motion picture to it."<sup>5</sup> In other words, all these films were shot to playback, a convention still employed in the filming of musical numbers. This method was necessary because any recording done with an acoustical horn required the performer to speak directly into the instrument, which would obviously be visible in the shot. In 1910 Edison demonstrated an improved Kinetophone that allowed the recording phonograph to be placed as far as twenty feet from the actors. It was now practical to produce talking pictures with both sight and sound recorded simultaneously, creating a far more effective illusion. Reporters assembled at West Orange on August 26 were shown a brief film in which "a fairly impressive man in a frock coat" explained the new process, illustrating his points by dropping an iron ball on the floor, smashing a plate, pounding a mallet, and tooting an automobile horn "with uncanny effect." Although Edison claimed the device would be "ready for the moving-picture shows in a couple of months," his staff would continue to tinker with it for another year and a half.<sup>6</sup> According to director William Haddock, developmental work on this new system took place at one of the studios on West 43rd Street in Manhattan before being transferred to Edison's Decatur Avenue studio in the Bronx.<sup>7</sup> "Edison's Talking Pictures" premiered simultaneously at eleven theaters around the country on February 17, 1913.

Although audiences had long been familiar with a range of competing talking film systems, they were astonished by the new Kinetophone. Crowds in New York applauded for a full fifteen minutes. Entertainment industry critic Robert Grau felt that "in theatrical history nothing to compare with the Edison talking pictures as a theatrical attraction during its first two weeks in the vaudeville theaters has ever been known."<sup>8</sup> Like many of the earlier talking film systems, the Kinetophone was neither distributed nor exhibited in the same way as conventional nickelodeon-era films. Edison produced the films himself in the Bronx, but assigned distribution rights to the American Talking-Picture Company, an arm of the powerful Keith-

Albee vaudeville circuit.<sup>9</sup> The new company acquired fifty projection units, which it installed at theaters it controlled in the United States and Canada. Neither Edison nor Keith-Albee considered these talking films to be a substitute for what had already become a well-established silent motion picture industry. Rather, the device was seen as a distinct technology whose commercial development would stand apart from the conventional cinema (Cinerama accomplished this trick in the 1950s). Within a few months the Kinetophone was everywhere. Of nine top vaudeville houses highlighted in the *New York Times*'s weekly program listing for April 22, five were showing "Edison's Talking Pictures."<sup>10</sup>

Because sound was recorded simultaneously with action, production of a Kinetophone subject was quite different from the standard filmmaking practice of 1913. At a time when feature-length films were gaining in popularity and even nickelodeon subjects frequently ran two reels (2,000 feet) in length, Kinetophones were limited to 400 feet owing to the capacity of the cylinder recording.<sup>11</sup> Films were shot in a single extended take, and the director was forced to sit quietly while the actors played the entire scene. Because the Bronx studio was not soundproof, many takes were spoiled by street noise, and production was often shifted to the evening hours to avoid disruption. Studio arc lighting sometimes ruined an otherwise acceptable take by hissing and sputtering, and the heat these lights gave off could soften and damage the wax recording masters.<sup>12</sup>

The initial amazement that greeted Edison's accomplishment soon began to fade once audiences realized that his Kinetophone subjects were little more than technical stunts. Not only did they lack the stylistic fluidity of "real movies" (editing, camera movement), but their exhibition on vaudeville bills, where they competed directly with live acts, only emphasized their weakness as theatrical entertainment. Nor did Edison offer the most popular stars or subjects. The new mechanical "amplifier" did succeed in capturing song and dialogue at a distance, but it had the effect of flattening everything into a single vocal plane. Performers like Viola Dana, who as a child appeared in several Kinetophone subjects, recalled having to articulate each line as if speaking before an enormous crowd.<sup>13</sup>

More than 250 Kinetophone subjects were shot in the Bronx between 1912 and 1914, but only a handful of synchronized viewing copies are available today. Perhaps the most interesting, *The Deaf Mute*, is a Civil War story shot entirely in an exterior setting. The plot involves a Union officer's use of various sound cues to discover if his prisoner is actually a Confederate spy or merely the "deaf mute" fruit peddler he claims to be. Cleverly directed within its severe technical limitations and with an amusing surprise ending, *The Deaf Mute* has the fascination of a talking dog act. We are impressed; but beyond its novelty value, the film can hardly compare with a good one-reeler or vaudeville playlet.

And the new technology itself proved a mixed blessing. Mechanical breakdowns

and lapses in synchronization plagued the system from the first weeks of its run. The projectionist was supposed to cue both picture and sound to the crack of two coconut shells that began every reel, but this level of technology was obviously inadequate. "From the very beginning the house was in an uproar," *Variety* reported of one troubled screening.<sup>14</sup> Audiences laughed or talked back to the screen, and there was no way to correct a problem once projection had begun. "This entire apparatus is the most unsatisfactory product we have ever turned out," lamented Edison's chief engineer, Miller Reese Hutchinson. The phonograph, placed near the screen, was linked to the projector by a long cord that ran under the floorboards of the theater. "It develops that rats have a very pronounced appetite for the string we use on the kinetophone."<sup>15</sup> Although the Kinetophone had a surprising international success (foreign affiliates opened studios in such cities as Tokyo, St. Petersburg, and Vienna), the fad had run its course in the United States by the summer of 1913. Fires at both the Bronx studio and the West Orange factory in 1914 provided the excuse to suspend Kinetophone production. It never resumed.<sup>16</sup>

Although many other talking film systems had come and gone, it was the highly publicized failure of Edison's Kinetophone that soured industry leaders on the very idea of "talkies." Once a fairly common novelty attraction, talking films nearly disappeared from the market, as well as from the memories of critics and audiences. Orlando Kellum's process, one of many Kinetophone competitors, was briefly dusted off by D. W. Griffith in 1921 for use in connection with *Dream Street*, but to no effect whatsoever. Even Edison, who had been predicting the "perfect illusion" of sight and sound, finally wrote off the notion as a bad idea. "Americans require a restful quiet in the moving picture theater, and for them talking from the lips of the figures on the screen destroys the illusion. Devices for projecting the film actor's speech can be perfected, but the idea is not practical. The stage is the place for the spoken word," he declared in May 1926.<sup>17</sup> He was responding to the latest wave of sound-film experimentation, a series of new technologies that would include De Forest Phonofilm, Fox-Case Movietone, and Western Electric Vitaphone. Edison was out of the film industry by then, but few in Hollywood would have argued with him.

### De Forest's Phonofilm

If Edison was out, Dr. Lee De Forest wanted in. De Forest was the inventor of the Audion, the three-element vacuum tube that allowed the great amplification of electronic signals required by long-distance telephony and radio broadcasting. He had licensed the device to American Telephone and Telegraph (AT&T) for telephone applications, but around 1918 he decided to investigate its potential in a sound

recording device himself. Realizing that lack of proper amplification had doomed earlier attempts at sound-on-film systems (such as those of one-time Edison associate Eugene Lauste), De Forest soon turned his experiments in that direction. In the spring of 1921 he claimed to have filmed his assistant, William Garity, speaking into a handheld microphone at his High Bridge, New York, laboratory.<sup>18</sup>

The quality of this early work left much to be desired. De Forest had an amplifying tube, but he needed to find an effective way of photographing a sound record onto motion picture film and playing it back again. He continued his research in Germany for the next eighteen months, and on his return to New York in September 1922, he moved into the old Talmadge studio at 318 East 48th Street, then operated as a rental facility by Tec-Art. De Forest had been using hardware of his own design, as well as materials supplied by other inventors, including Jacob Kuntz and Theodore Case. He soon came to depend on Case's Thalofide, a photoelectric cell that proved superior at reading the optical soundtrack. Later that year he traveled to the Case Research Laboratory at 205 West Genesee Street in Auburn, New York. The result of this visit was Case's development of the AEO light, a lamp that glowed or flickered in proportion to the amount of electric current it was receiving from the microphone. This glow could be photographed onto a strip of motion picture film. Accounts differ as to the extent of De Forest's input in the development of the AEO light, which proved crucial in the production of the world's first commercial sound-on-film system, the Phonofilm.<sup>19</sup>

On March 13, 1923, De Forest showed his Phonofilms to the New York press, and on April 15 they opened at the Rivoli Theatre on 49th Street. The program included short "talking and singing" presentations by Joe Weber and Lew Fields, Eddie Cantor, Noble Sissle and Eubie Blake, Ben Bernie's Orchestra, and Ziegfeld favorites Eva Puck and Sammy White. The programming suggested Edison's Kinetophone bills, but De Forest took pains to separate his new system from any memory of that fiasco. Advertisements offered a \$10,000 reward "to any person who finds a phonograph or similar device used in the phonofilms" and boasted that the films' stars "sing, talk and reproduce music without the aid of a phonograph."<sup>20</sup>

In fact, De Forest tried to associate Phonofilm in the public mind with radio, not only to take advantage of his own reputation as "the father of radio," but also because "radio" had become a code word for any hot new electronic technology. Historian Donald Crafton suggests that De Forest saw the Phonofilm as a "virtual Broadway," a combination of theater and radio that could bring an illusion of big-city entertainment to any country town.<sup>21</sup> A few weeks after Phonofilm's Broadway premiere, De Forest traveled to Atlantic City to address the Society of Motion Picture Engineers. "If you ask whether the ordinary silent drama to which we are all familiarized can in general be improved by the addition of the voice, the answer is unquestionably 'No,'" he told them. Instead, "an entirely new form of screen drama

can be worked out, taking advantage of the possibilities of introducing music and voice, and appropriate acoustic effects, not necessarily thruout the entire action.”<sup>22</sup>

Phonofilm had resolved the problems of amplification and synchronization, and the quality of its sound reproduction gradually improved. But De Forest could never interest any of the major Hollywood producers in his system, no matter what the results. Crafton suggests that De Forest’s anti-Semitic streak made relations with such industry moguls as William Fox impossible.<sup>23</sup> Nevertheless, the inventor claimed to have wired at least fifty theaters by October 1926, and by the following year he may have produced as many as a thousand Phonofilm subjects.<sup>24</sup> Although their production values are meager, surviving Phonofilms indicate that De Forest did succeed in demonstrating the technical feasibility of talking films, investigating “new forms of screen drama,” and even providing a modicum of entertainment.

In addition to the star turns offered by various celebrities (who also included George Jessel and Harry Lauder, DeWolf Hopper reciting “Casey at the Bat,” and Edwin Markham reading his poem “The Man with a Hoe”), De Forest pioneered a range of innovative uses for the sound film. In 1924 Phonofilm presented a series of political speeches by presidential candidates Calvin Coolidge, Robert La Follette, and John W. Davis, as well as Franklin D. Roosevelt’s speech to the Democratic Convention nominating fellow New Yorker Al Smith. Announcing that “in the near future pictures will have their special orchestrations Phonofilmed, which will enable the smallest exhibitor to give his patrons the same musical accompaniment now heard only in the Metropolitan first-run houses,” De Forest prepared a synchronized score for the first two reels of *The Covered Wagon*, which Hugo Riesenfeld employed during orchestra breaks at the Rivoli. De Forest later recorded Riesenfeld’s complete score for Fritz Lang’s *Siegfried* at the Century Theater, in both instances demonstrating how a sound track could be “double-printed” onto previously existing material.<sup>25</sup> Working with Max Fleischer, he produced Phonofilm versions of several previously silent “bouncing ball” cartoons, including *My Old Kentucky Home*. According to animation historian Leslie Cabarga, “Bimbo walks into a room, plays a trombone and clumsily mouths the words, ‘Now let’s all follow the bouncing ball and sing along.’”<sup>26</sup> Combining his Phonofilm system with a two-color Technicolor camera, De Forest produced a natural-color sound film of Nikita Balieff’s theatrical troupe Chauve-Souris in 1925.<sup>27</sup> That same year he startled members of New York’s Lamb’s Club when a Phonofilm appeared on screen in their sacred precincts, with Gloria Swanson singing a song and arguing with club Shepherd Thomas Meighan over the Lambs’ exclusion of women.<sup>28</sup>

Back in Auburn, Theodore Case was not happy with De Forest or his Phonofilms. De Forest’s system depended on the Thalofide and the AEO light, both of which he had licensed from Case in February 1923. Case felt he was not receiving adequate credit, especially for his work on the 1924 campaign films, which he had

shot with his own equipment in Washington. He had little regard for De Forest's understanding of electronics and suspected that the entire scheme might simply be another fraudulent stock manipulation (De Forest had been narrowly acquitted on similar charges a decade earlier).<sup>29</sup> Case decided to perfect a system of his own. In August 1924 he built a small recording studio in the basement of his laboratory, ten feet square and six feet tall, which he lined with hair felt and lit with a dozen 1,000-watt lamps. Case's assistant, E. I. Sponable, sat outside this box with the camera, looking in through a small porthole (the opposite of later practice, in which it was the camera that would be closeted). Surviving test films show Case repeating the phrase "Cheese crisps" over and over, trying to communicate with Sponable ("Alright E.I., you can shut the thing off now. Yeah, shut it off. E.I.? Will you please shut the camera off?") and exclaiming, "Gee, whittikers, those lights are awfully bright!"<sup>30</sup> Case broke with De Forest in September 1925, leaving his erstwhile partner with the problem of finding replacements for the Thalofide and AEO light.<sup>31</sup>

Case tried to promote the improved system by filming some vaudevillians on his own. On May 12, 1925, he recorded Gus Visor fondling a duck and singing "Ma, He's Making Eyes at Me," a piece of footage better known today than at the time of its original release.<sup>32</sup> At first, he had no better luck than De Forest. The Keith-Albee chain wanted nothing to do with talking films, having been burned on more than one occasion. But on March 19, 1926, a Fox representative arrived in Auburn and was intrigued enough to order a further series of demonstrations in New York, including at least one on May 2 at the Nemo Theatre, Broadway and 110th Street. The process was being pushed by Courtland Smith, Fox's head of nontheatrical operations, but his efforts to interest other industry executives had mixed results. Jesse Lasky was enthusiastic, but all Adolph Zukor could say was, "I told you that you couldn't do it."<sup>33</sup> William Fox, however, was so impressed by the shot of a canary singing in a cage that he ordered further tests to be made at his West 55th Street studio. Sponable constructed a hair felt recording studio inside the main Fox stage, and between June 8 and 24 he shot 300,000 feet of test footage. The results were successful, and on July 23 the Fox-Case Corporation was formed to exploit talking films commercially. Twenty blocks away, inside Oscar Hammerstein's old Manhattan Opera House, Warner Bros. and Western Electric had just completed a series of short talking films of their own.

### **The Vitaphone Corporation**

Western Electric, the company responsible for the commercial application of AT&T technology, had been looking for other means of exploiting the potential of the De Forest Audion. It had recently perfected the loud-speaking telephone



(or public address system) and had developed a means of electrical recording for phonograph records, so a sound film system seemed the next obvious step. On October 27, 1922, chief engineer Edward B. Craft gave a demonstration to the American Institute of Electrical Engineers at Yale in which a phonograph record provided the narration for an industrial film on amplifier technology.<sup>34</sup> Although the mechanical principle here dated from the turn of the century, the use of electrical recording and reproducing did mark a significant advance over previous sound-on-disc systems. At the same time, Western Electric was also developing a means of recording sound directly onto the film itself, through the use of a light valve developed by E. C. Wente, inventor of the condenser microphone. Where De Forest and Case used a lamp of fluctuating intensity to create their sound records, the light valve operated like a shutter: a pair of duralumin wires vibrated together in an electromagnetic field governed by the strength of the recording signal.

Working at the Bell Telephone Laboratories on West Street in Manhattan, an engineering team led by Stanley Watkins soon developed the disc version to what they felt was a level of commercial perfection. But when Western Electric approached the major film studios in May 1924, it found no interest whatsoever. At a time when De Forest's Phonofilms showed no sign of igniting public interest in talkies, the producers saw little reason to abandon their enormous investment in silent cinema. Eventually Western Electric turned over commercial development rights to a promoter, Walter Rich, and on June 25, 1925, Rich joined with Warner Bros. in creating the Vitaphone Corporation.

Warner Bros. was not Western Electric's first choice, but neither was it the financially insecure minor producer of legend. The studio had an aggressive management and impressive connections in the financial markets. Only two months before, it had swallowed the venerable Vitagraph Company and was rapidly acquiring its own theater chain.<sup>35</sup> In fact, as owner and operator of radio station KFWB in Los Angeles, Warners already had more experience with Western Electric's new sound technology than any other studio in the country. Nathan Levinson, the Western Electric representative who set up this station, appears to have told Sam Warner about the new talking film system in the first place.<sup>36</sup>

Sam Warner could envision the possibilities of this new technology, but Harry Warner was president of Warner Bros. Pictures, and Harry, like every other CEO in the business, wanted nothing to do with talking pictures. An authorized history published in 1929 recounts the moment when Harry finally comes around, having realized that Edison, De Forest, and all the rest were on the wrong track in attempting to introduce talking films. What the industry really needed were *sound* films. "I wouldn't be so foolish as to try to make talking pictures," he tells Sam.

That's what everybody else has done, and lost. No, we'll do better than that: we can use this thing for other purposes. We can use it *for musical accompani-*

*ment to our pictures!* We can film and record vaudeville and musical acts, and make up programs for houses that can't afford the real thing or can't get big-time acts. Think of what it would mean to a small independent theatre owner to buy his orchestra with his pictures! Not to have an organ! Not a musician in the house!<sup>37</sup>

In his autobiography, Jack Warner repeats most of this same exchange, but ends with Harry announcing, "Who the hell wants to hear actors talk? The music—that's the big plus about this."<sup>38</sup>

The motion picture industry was the single largest employer of musicians in the country, and the cost of maintaining theater orchestras, not just at the Rivoli or Rialto on Broadway, but in the other twenty thousand theaters scattered across the country, was tremendous.<sup>39</sup> Harry Warner realized that by canning the music, Vitaphone could save the industry the weekly salaries of tens of thousands of musicians at a stroke. Was he familiar with De Forest's Phonofilm edition of *The Covered Wagon* or his speech to the Society of Motion Picture Engineers in which he had predicted recorded accompaniments for otherwise silent films?<sup>40</sup>

Sam Warner and Stanley Watkins immediately began to set up a proper Vitaphone facility at Warners' newly acquired Vitagraph studio in Flatbush. There was no thought of locating this operation in California, which was too far from the engineering support of Bell Laboratories on West Street. More important, all the talent they planned to use was based in New York. The theater musicians whom Vitaphone intended to replace performed more than just the accompaniments to feature films. They also played introductory overtures and accompanied the various short films and live acts that were mandatory in all first-class theaters, even in the smallest towns.<sup>41</sup> Vitaphone would be responsible not only for scoring the features, but also for replacing all these preliminary acts.

In the summer of 1925 Warners constructed a rudimentary soundstage inside one of Vitagraph's silent stages. It was a box fifty feet square and thirty feet high, and the acoustical treatment consisted of a large quantity of old rugs hung all over the walls. The Vitaphone unit worked here for almost a year, not to develop the technology, but to master it. Earlier talking films generally consisted of a single shot from a single camera angle. Warners needed to learn how to restore some of the fluidity of the silent screen before going public with the Vitaphone (a lesson the technical crew reviewed each week as they watched De Forest's latest Phonofilms). Cameraman Ed Du Par filmed Alexander Graham Bell's assistant, Thomas Watson, recounting the invention of the telephone fifty years earlier, a musical number in which a Russian double quartet sang the "Song of the Volga Boatman," and dozens of similar tests.<sup>42</sup>

It soon became clear that the Vitagraph facility was not an ideal talking picture studio, at least in its current configuration. The carpets on the walls could

never keep out the rumble of the Brighton Beach elevated line, which ran right past the studio. In May 1926 Warners leased Oscar Hammerstein's Manhattan Opera House at Eighth Avenue and 34th Street, and between June 17 and July 22 filmed all the short supporting acts that would accompany the silent feature *Don Juan* at Vitaphone's historic New York premiere.<sup>43</sup> Yet even the Manhattan Opera House was no sound studio. Its thick stone walls provided better insulation, but Eighth Avenue also had subways, as well as periodic dynamite blasts from local construction sites. Faced with the same problem that had afflicted Edison in the Bronx, the crew was forced to do much of its work at night.<sup>44</sup>

The interior layout of the opera house dictated the fourth-wall view of the camera. The acts all took their natural place on stage, while the cameras observed from inside a soundproof booth in the auditorium, where part of the seating had been covered over. "We have from two to four cameras going at one time," Du Par reported:

The long-shot camera is what we call the master camera. It takes the master film and is interlocked with the recording machine. The close-up camera has a synchronous motor and can be started and stopped at will. I have taken as many as ten close-ups during one number, or in the space of 11 minutes. I have four lenses on the camera, ranging from a 40mm to a six-inch. They are all focused in advance. All I have to do is to change them, and panoram the camera to the next object to be photographed.<sup>45</sup>

The disc recorders were tucked away in tenor John McCormack's old dressing room, and the monitor booth was up on the sixth floor, making communication with the stage rather difficult.<sup>46</sup> Where De Forest chose to film such "Broadway favorites" as George Jessel and Eddie Cantor, Sam Warner contracted with the Metropolitan Opera for the use of its stars, bathing the Vitaphone in the aura of high art. Appearances by Mischa Elman, Marion Talley, Efrem Zimbalist, Harold Bauer, Giovanni Martinelli, and Anna Case would make up the major portion of the premiere program; the only nonclassical artist on the bill was Roy Smeck, who was recorded on July 14 playing his Hawaiian guitar and ukulele. When the print of *Don Juan* arrived from Hollywood, the New York Philharmonic recorded the accompaniment on the stage of the opera house.

The Vitaphone premiere at the Warners' Theatre, Broadway and 52nd Street, took place on the night of August 6, 1926, and was an immediate sensation. "There can be no doubt that the Vitaphone is a real triumph," Robert E. Sherwood told the readers of *Life*. "It is as far ahead of De Forest's Phonofilm as the Phonofilm was ahead of Edison's ill-fated Kinetophone (I think it was called that)."<sup>47</sup> The critics were awed by the power and clarity of Vitaphone's amplification system, but they also sensed that, for the first time, these talkies were real films. The year Sam Warner had devoted to refining production techniques clearly showed on screen and

helped give Vitaphone the polish that turned it into a lasting success. As historian Charles Wolfe has pointed out, even a potentially static subject like the *Tannhauser* overture, recorded by the New York Philharmonic on July 22, contains fourteen shots and seven camera movements (or, as Du Par called them, “panorams”).<sup>48</sup>

### Fox-Case Movietone

The same month that Vitaphone premiered at the Warners' Theatre, E. I. Sponable arrived from Auburn to set up the Fox-Case Movietone studio. Unlike the renovated facilities used by Warners and De Forest, it was designed and constructed specifically for the production of talking films. Movietone was not located in the main Fox studio building but occupied a smaller structure at 460 West 54th Street that had been used for storing surplus seats and carpeting from Fox theaters. It also held the studio tank in which Harry Millarde had filmed part of the flood scene for *The Town That Forgot God* in 1922. Unfortunately, the tank had leaked, and the stench from the mildewed carpets was ghastly.<sup>49</sup>

Sponable ordered the creation of two recording studios, each completely enclosed by a double wall of three-inch-thick gypsum blocks separated by a six-inch air space. Walls and ceilings were lined with Celotex, soft pile carpeting covered the floors, and heavy monk's cloth drapes provided additional acoustical treatment. The stages were fully air-conditioned.<sup>50</sup> The first tests were shot on October 25, 1926, and the following day Sponable filmed Sir Harry Lauder (who stopped his act in mid-performance to announce “This is a test”). On November 4 the studio began using “regular motion picture production technique” to shoot the first of a series of one-reel musical numbers starring Raquel Meller.<sup>51</sup>

Under the general supervision of Courtland Smith, the first Fox talkies were shot in this new Movietone studio on West 54th Street: Raquel Meller in *The Wife of the Toreador*; Chic Sale, Joe Cook, and Robert Benchley reciting comic monologues; and Bea Lillie, Frieda Hempel, and Ben Bernie's band performing their own musical specialties. The public had its first look at some of these films on January 21, 1927, at the Sam Harris Theater on Eighth Avenue, and Movietone went into general release on February 25. Although their recording and reproducing systems were quite different, Fox and Warners both depended on Western Electric amplifiers, speakers, and microphones, and they had cross-licensed their patents on January 5. Theaters were now free to install both systems, as the new Roxy did when it opened on March 11.

Theodore Case was very proud of the fact that his system recorded the sound track directly onto the camera negative during photography, seeing this as a guarantee against the loss of synchronization (a problem that helped sink the Kinetophone and also plagued the Vitaphone). But this “single-system” process had drawbacks of

its own, especially in terms of editing. Where Vitaphone was already shooting two to four angles on any scene, Movietone's cameraman, George Lane, had to make do with one.

Fox-Case did have one great advantage over Vitaphone, however, and that was its relative portability and ease of operation away from the studio. Phonofilm had demonstrated the news value of talking pictures when it presented Calvin Coolidge and the other presidential candidates in 1924. With Vitaphone restricting itself to filmed entertainments, William Fox realized that he could differentiate Movietone by emphasizing these capabilities. He ordered the construction of mobile units, and Allan Dwan took one up to West Point in April 1927 to film the cadets on parade. Movietone scored its first great coup on May 21, when footage of Charles Lindbergh's takeoff from Roosevelt Field was screened that same night at the Roxy.<sup>52</sup> Fox Movietone News began to appear on a regular basis by the end of 1927, often featuring celebrity interviews shot by these mobile units.

By contrast, production of entertainment shorts seemed desultory at best. The authoritative release listings of 1928–1929 short subjects given in the *Film Daily Yearbook of Motion Pictures* indicate the number of Movietone comedies and entertainments as “indefinite.”<sup>53</sup> Artistic control was in the hands of technicians: E. I. Sponable was credited as director of Gertrude Lawrence's first film, *I Don't Know How It Happened*, and cameraman George Lane is listed as director of her second release, *Early Mourning*.<sup>54</sup> Not until the spring of 1928 did Fox produce a talking film in Hollywood, when Winfield Sheehan took over two of the mobile news units that had been assigned to the West Coast and shot *The Family Picnic*, a two-reel comedy. That summer Sponable and most of his engineering staff relocated to California, where in less than ninety days they designed and constructed Movietone City in Beverly Hills, Fox's vast new production headquarters.<sup>55</sup>

News of production activity at the Movietone studio on West 54th Street gradually disappeared from the local trade papers, but the facility was far from abandoned. For a few months in the spring of 1929 Metro Movietones were made there, and when MGM left, the studio entered the growing ranks of New York rental facilities. One of the first tenants was *Vogue* magazine's *Vogue Fashion Films* series, produced by Mary Warner.<sup>56</sup> Fox itself continued to use the studio for screen tests and oddities, like the series of “brief skits boosting prosperity” hosted by Fox president Harley Clarke at the end of 1930.<sup>57</sup> And Fox Movietone News remained in New York, as did all other American newsreels.

### Vitaphone Mass Production

Although the Movietone system had many obvious advantages, the coming of sound to the American cinema has always been firmly associated with Vitaphone. The

reason for this success was not simply AT&T's industrial stature or any technological advantages of Western Electric's hardware. What allowed Vitaphone to move so far ahead of its competitors was Warner Bros.' decision to devote two years to experimentation in New York between 1925 and 1927, when talking pictures were transformed into something more than a simple mechanical curiosity. After the *Don Juan* premiere, Warners continued to work at the Manhattan Opera House, recording accompaniments for silent Vitaphone features and filming the short musical acts that would support them. On October 5, 1926, the second Vitaphone bill opened at the Colony Theatre along with Syd Chaplin's wartime silent comedy, *The Better 'Ole*. Not only did this program feature more accessible vaudeville and musical comedy stars, but nearly all the shorts mixed dialogue with music in imaginative and impressive fashion. George Jessel, Elsie Janis, Willie and Eugene Howard, and Al Jolson all talked as well as sang, easily stealing the show from the feature picture. In blackface for what was billed as *Al Jolson in a Plantation Act*, the singer electrified the audience with a medley of his greatest hits. "You ain't heard nothin' yet," he said from the screen (twice), while offering a defense of "Mammy songs" as "the fundamental songs of our country." According to the *New York Times*, "This Vitaphone [short] assuredly destroys the old silent tradition of the screen."<sup>58</sup>

By May 1927 Warners had completed its first West Coast sound stage (at the old Vitagraph studio on Prospect Avenue), and Vitaphone production was transferred to Hollywood. Ex-vaudevillian Bryan Foy was put in charge of the shorts department, which, in addition to musical subjects, began making a few all-dialogue dramatic films. The technical crew, including cameraman Ed Du Par, came directly from New York.<sup>59</sup> The Warner brothers were gradually giving up on their original plans for Vitaphone and were now making films in which actors did speak their lines (as Edison and De Forest had done before them). That summer they put Jolson into *The Jazz Singer*, their first feature-length film with interpolated dialogue and music. In February 1928, Foy and Du Par produced an overgrown dramatic skit called *Lights of New York*, which became Warners' first all-talking feature film and an even greater success than *The Jazz Singer*. The increased demand for talkies following its release in July swamped Warners' West Coast stages and convinced the company to rebuild the Brooklyn studio to handle the overflow. Bryan Foy was sent out to take charge in November.<sup>60</sup>

A son of the famous Eddie Foy and once part of his "Seven Little Foyes" vaudeville act, Bryan Foy was hardworking and ambitious. Within two months of arriving in Flatbush he had completed fifty Vitaphone shorts, sometimes shooting as many as three films in one day.<sup>61</sup> On Sunday, December 16, 1928, the studio made its first "recording," a test of Berlin theatrical star Alexander Moissi. A vaudeville short with the Bing Boys, made on December 27, was the first commercial product.<sup>62</sup> Foy had brought cinematographer Ed Du Par with him, but he hired a new man, Frank Namy, as his art director. Namy had once worked for Edison and understood



that sets had to be built quickly and efficiently. He soon adopted a stylized architectural shorthand, which he described as “modernistic,” a spare, somewhat angular decorative scheme that he hoped would eventually transform popular taste in much the same way that movie costuming had done.<sup>63</sup>

Foy’s most elaborate production was a German-language feature called *Die Königsloge* (The Royal Box), which he shot in May and June 1929.<sup>64</sup> Although Warners had previously made a few shorts in multiple-language versions and would pioneer in the production of multiple-language features, there was never an English-language version of *Die Königsloge*. The film was adapted from a recent Broadway play on the life of the actor Edmund Kean and starred Alexander Moissi, a well-known Max Reinhardt actor, and Camilla Horn, who had played Gretchen in F. W. Murnau’s *Faust*. Horn was returning to Germany after a brief stint in Hollywood, a victim of the talkies; Moissi had never made it that far. *Die Königsloge* later opened at a New York art house and played domestically in a few other cities with German-speaking populations, but such films were really intended for the export market.<sup>65</sup>

Although Warners would make no more foreign-language features in Brooklyn, the studio soon became a major center for the production of Spanish-, German-, and French-language shorts, especially after the completion of a second sound-stage late in 1929. The following summer a series of fifteen to twenty-five Spanish-language films was announced, starting with Eduardo Arozemena in *Querer es poder* (Where There’s a Will) and Tito Coral in *Los Alpinistas* (Alpine Echoes).<sup>66</sup> But despite a burst of such activity among all New York studios that season, the major producers had given up on foreign-language production by 1931.

When Foy was sent to Brooklyn at the end of 1928, his writer, Murray Roth, stayed behind in Hollywood to take charge of short-film production at the main studio. But he soon came east to help with the script of *Die Königsloge*, and, with Foy busy on the feature, Roth began directing the shorts in Brooklyn himself.<sup>67</sup> Roth continued Foy’s policy of dramatizing these short comic or musical vignettes as much as possible. Sometimes the situation would be as simple as having George Burns and Gracie Allen puzzle over the very nature of the film medium (“Where’s the audience?”) in their first film appearance, *Lambchops* (August 1929). *Fred Allen’s Prize Playlets* (September 1929), a bizarre series of darkly comic blackout sketches, was given a far more ambitious staging than anything Robert Benchley had made at Fox, complete with “modernistic” decor by Namczy. Even *Leo Reisman and His Hotel Brunswick Orchestra in “Rhythm”* (1929), an otherwise ordinary band short, was filmed mainly in silhouette, with a montage of appropriate stock footage illustrating the music. Roth featured such headliners as Bert Lahr, Lou Holtz, and Edgar Bergen, but he also cast his films with interesting newcomers from the New York theater, such as Humphrey Bogart and Joan Blondell in support of Ruth Etting in *Broadway’s Like That* (January 1930). There was so much activity by the end of 1929

that Roth had to bring in Arthur Sweeney, the chief cutter at Paramount, because the editorial staff in Brooklyn had fallen so far behind schedule.<sup>68</sup>

Roth's most interesting work may well have been *Yamekraw* (April 1930), a tone poem based on the music of James P. Johnson. In a single musical reel, the film offers an expressionistic vision of the African American journey from country to city, using visual and dramatic devices clearly borrowed from Rouben Mamoulian's Theatre Guild production of *Porgy* (1927), King Vidor's MGM feature *Hallelujah!* (1929), and Robert Florey's experimental short *The Life and Death of 9413, a Hollywood Extra* (1928). Many of the performers were recruited from the original Broadway cast of another stylized all-black production, *The Green Pastures* (1930).<sup>69</sup>

Roth and Du Par (who remained the chief cameraman at the Brooklyn Vitaphone studio for many years) accomplished all this despite the limitations of the disc sound system that Warner Bros. was committed to until 1931. Although by 1929 all of Warners' competitors had dropped disc recording in favor of one of the competing sound-on-film processes, at the Vitaphone studio "we find little choice between the best film reproduction and the average disc reproduction," according



Jimmy Mordecai starred in Murray Roth's *Yamekraw* (1930), an ambitious Vitaphone short clearly influenced by such black-cast Broadway productions as *Porgy* and *Green Pastures*. Photofest.

to the chief engineer. "The disc method, however, has the extremely valuable characteristic of being more uniform and reliable than the film in the theater."<sup>70</sup> In other words, Warners insisted that the superior quality of sound achieved in the theater by its disc system more than compensated for the nightmarish problems of editing and (from the exhibitor's point of view) shipping and handling. In 1930 the Brooklyn studio was recording onto both film and disc (Western Electric supported both systems) but always treated the disc recording as the master material. It is unclear exactly when disc recordings stopped, but the announcement in July 1930 that Vitaphone had filmed its first 100 percent exterior short (the Three Sailors in *The Recruits*, at Sea Gate, New Jersey) suggests that the mobile unit must have left the delicate recording lathes back in Brooklyn.<sup>71</sup>

When the studio celebrated the second anniversary of its reopening in December 1930, it could claim that the four hundred one- and two-reel films completed so far made it the most prolific short-film producer in the country.<sup>72</sup> This was the same amount of footage required by sixty feature pictures, and Warners had increased the directorial staff accordingly. Bryan Foy had gone back to the West Coast in the summer of 1929, but briefly returned to Brooklyn later that year before relocating permanently to California as the head of Warners' low-budget feature unit. Murray Roth remained in charge, with directors Arthur Hurley, Roy Mack, Alf Goulding, and, for a time, Edmund Joseph all on staff. The films they made constitute perhaps the finest record of American popular entertainment at the close of the 1920s (or would, if more than a fraction of them survived today). They filmed musicals with Red Nichols and His Five Pennies, the Mound City Blue Blowers, and Green's Twentieth Century Fayettes; vaudeville acts with Joe E. Brown, Georgie Price, and F. E. Miller and Aubrey Lyles; short dramatic skits with Sessue Hayakawa, Judith Anderson, and Spencer Tracy; and even a few classical headliners like violinist Albert Spalding, soprano Frances Alda, and tenor Giovanni Martinelli (a Vitaphone favorite).<sup>73</sup>

A reporter from the *Film Daily* visited the studio late in 1930 and saw that production units were organized around the various directors on the lot, each of whom had his own personality: "Murray Roth, director-in-chief, is never without a cane. Roy Mack couldn't direct without a gray fedora on the back of his head and an unlit cigar in his mouth; Arthur Hurley usually chews gum and nervously twirls his spectacles while staging a scene, while Alf Goulding wouldn't think of walking on the set unless his hair is carefully slicked back in place."<sup>74</sup> This cozy image belies the constant buzz of technical improvements accomplished during the tenure of Foy and Roth. A new soundstage, 135 × 60 feet and 30 feet high, had opened at the end of 1929, increasing the number of available recording channels to three.<sup>75</sup> A year later the old glass stages were torn down to make room for additional studios, vaults, and laboratories. By then, Du Par's cameras had emerged from the old soundproof

booths and were enclosed in padded “blimps,” giving them far greater mobility.<sup>76</sup> As noted earlier, the studio was gradually weaning itself away from dependence on the clumsy disc-recording process. All this was accomplished with the studio continuing to operate at peak capacity. But by the middle of 1931 Warners had been severely hit by the growing economic crisis (in the course of the year its stock would drop 87 percent, slightly more than the industry average).<sup>77</sup> Theaters were closing down for the slack summer months, and cash flow had slowed to a trickle. Although construction continued on the new facilities in Brooklyn, production was shut down from May 9 through July 27.<sup>78</sup>

When work resumed, Warners named Sam Sax as general production manager of the studio, above “director-in-chief” Murray Roth. Roth had picked up his production experience while working with the creative Bryan Foy; Sax, on the other hand, was a no-nonsense studio executive of the old school. He had even run his own low-budget operation in Hollywood, Gotham Productions. Sax immediately began to make personnel changes, replacing director Arthur Hurley with Joseph Henabery, who had worked for him at Gotham, and appointing David Mendoza as musical director in place of Harold Levey.<sup>79</sup> Roth resigned on February 10, 1932, along with his head writer, Stanley Rauh, whom Sax replaced with Herman Ruby.<sup>80</sup>

Warners had no intention of stopping the production of one- and two-reel shorts, and it fully understood the advantages offered by the Brooklyn studio. Sax’s mandate was to cut costs and focus on the production of comedies and light musicals, films that could be sold without difficulty anywhere in the country. There would be no more dramatic playlets and no more ambitious tone poems like *Yamekraw*. And because Local 52 had so much power in the New York studios (at least in contrast to the West Coast unions), there would be no more overtime, either. “In this studio we work on schedule,” Sax told a reporter for the *New York Sun* in 1932. “We start on schedule, and we finish on schedule. When we start a picture in the morning, we start at nine o’clock. When we start in the afternoon, we start at two o’clock. It is now ten minutes past two. The picture has been in production for ten minutes.”<sup>81</sup> Sax made sure that crews stopped work promptly at 5:30 every afternoon and never later than 12:30 on Saturdays. On Sundays, Vitaphone was closed. This was the opposite of how Warners made movies on the West Coast, where directors like Busby Berkeley thought nothing of working their cast and crews all weekend and far into the night. In the future, demands for such “unreasonable” working conditions by unionized New York crews would weigh heavily in the decision to centralize all production in California once again.

But for the moment, there were still good commercial reasons to operate studios in New York, and the hegemony of Hollywood, which had seemed complete as the silent era ended, was challenged by a burst of East Coast production. Warners had pioneered the production of talkies in New York, and by the end of 1928 MGM,

Paramount, RKO, and Pathé were all operating local sound studios of their own. William Le Baron, who had worked in New York in the silent days and in 1929 was production head of RKO in Hollywood, felt that, “[a]s a general rule, there will probably be more production in New York than during the past few years. This is occasioned, of course, by the fact that many stage people are being used in sound pictures—people whose contracts with stage producers will not permit them to leave New York for long periods.”<sup>82</sup>

Without question, it was the presence of the Broadway stage, and the actors, writers, and directors associated with it, that revived the moribund motion picture industry in New York. Broadway gave the city an edge that Chicago, San Francisco, Philadelphia, and other once-active film production centers never possessed.<sup>83</sup> At first, it was not just the “stage people” but the plays themselves that attracted film producers. For a brief moment it was thought that Broadway hits could be shot right off the boards, and it was announced that Florence Reed in *The Shanghai Gesture*, Al Woods’s *Crime*, and a series of sketches by Eva Le Gallienne’s Civic Repertory Theater would be filmed in this manner.<sup>84</sup> Given the technical limitations of this period, such an attempt would have been impractical, and the above films were never made.<sup>85</sup>

Paramount proved to be the only local producer committed to a full complement of feature pictures as well as a continuing short subject program, and drew heavily on Broadway resources for both. Of course, Paramount was also the wealthiest of the Hollywood majors and the only one with a continuing tradition of East Coast production. It also had the largest and most modern facility in the area, the Astoria studio, which had been opened in 1920 (some of the buildings on the Vitagraph lot dated to 1908). Industry observers might well have expected Paramount to reopen Astoria just one year after shutting it down, behavior consistent with the on-again, off-again policy it had maintained throughout the 1920s. MGM, RKO, and Pathé had reasons of their own for coming east, and although they soon dropped early efforts at feature production, for a time each was filming most of its one- and two-reel releases in and around New York.

Short films have long been marginalized in most histories of the cinema, which (except for the work of a handful of great comedians) essentially ignore the format after the nickelodeon era.<sup>86</sup> A structure that served D. W. Griffith perfectly well suddenly seems devoid of any aesthetic interest, and even economic and cultural historians generally draw their conclusions solely from an analysis of feature-length pictures. But short subjects were ubiquitous during the American cinema’s “classic” period, and well into the 1930s audiences saw two or three shorts for every feature they sat through. The production of shorts actually *increased* with the coming of sound because, as Harry Warner had hoped, they usurped all the time that had previously been taken up by live acts, orchestral overtures, and theatrical pro-



logues. The *Film Daily Yearbook's* listing of "Short Subject Releases" for 1929 totals 2,578 reels of shorts available from thirty-six producers—a figure that does not even count the Warners Vitaphone output.<sup>87</sup>

Because these new talkie shorts were designed to replace an essentially theatrical experience, some producers apparently believed that they should look and feel as much like stage performances as possible. And the best place to acquire that kind of material, of course, was Broadway. Ironically, short films had been an insignificant part of East Coast production ever since features had come to dominate the market; the typical silent short was a two-reel Western or slapstick comedy that could best be turned out in quantity at the much larger Hollywood studios. So, while the advent of talkies saved the motion picture industry in the East, it also transformed that industry from one devoted almost entirely to features to one dominated by the mass production of one- and two-reelers. And that shift, given the prejudices of most critics and historians, meant that the motion picture industry in New York might just as well have disappeared, especially after Paramount stopped making features at Astoria in 1932.

### Metro Movietone

In July 1928, the same month that Warners opened *Lights of New York*, MGM moved into Hearst's Cosmopolitan studio on a two-year lease. It had been a year since Frank Capra completed *For the Love of Mike* there, but the enormous Harlem studio on 127th Street and Second Avenue had not been entirely empty all that time. Even before the MGM announcement, Cosmopolitan was listed as one of New York's "active" studios, with Frank Zucker, Lester Lang, and Walter Streng as staff cameramen and four resident production companies, including Cosmopolitan itself, Samuel Bloom Features, Eugene Spitz Productions, and the North American Society of Arts.<sup>88</sup> In June, the *Film Daily* had reported on an ambitious "Great Actors and Authors" series then in production at Cosmopolitan under the direction of Edmund Lawrence. Two films were listed as already completed: *Walls Have Ears*, written by Irwin Cobb, with Madge Kennedy, Efreim Zimbalist, Hale Hamilton, and Roland Young; and *The Home Girl* by Edna Ferber, with Margalo Gilmore, Otto Kruger, Miriam Hopkins, and the Vincent Lopez Orchestra. Another film then in production, *The Dancing Town*, by Rupert Hughes, was said to be the fourth in the series. *Film Daily* listed the cast as Helen Hayes, Ada May, Hal Skelly, Jefferson De Angelis, Humphrey Bogart, and Elizabeth Patterson.<sup>89</sup> The presence of the Vincent Lopez Orchestra suggests that these were sound films, but no sound system is indicated, and we know that MGM had to install one when its production crew arrived at the studio later that summer. Despite the presence of such high-



profile stars, and the fact that the films were distributed that fall by Paramount (as the “Great Stars and Authors” series), these shorts have been almost completely ignored by later historians.<sup>90</sup>

In the summer of 1927 MGM production chief Irving Thalberg announced that “[t]he talking motion picture has its place, as has color photography, but I do not believe [it] will ever replace the silent drama any more than I believe colored photography will replace entirely the present back-and-white.”<sup>91</sup> Thalberg, of course, was echoing Lee De Forest’s 1923 prediction that talking pictures would grow up alongside the silent cinema and not supplant the older medium entirely. Although such thinking may seem shortsighted today, it was quite reasonable for these men to see talking pictures as a technological sideshow, something like the current IMAX system, which exists parallel to the conventional cinema but has had little impact on it artistically or economically.

MGM was slow to understand the success of Vitaphone and Movietone, and its first “sound” release was *White Shadows in the South Seas*, a silent film to which a musical track was added at the Victor recording studio in Camden, New Jersey. Before its own Culver City soundstages were built in the summer of 1928, MGM borrowed Paramount’s West Coast facilities to add two reels of dialogue to *Alias Jimmy Valentine*, a conservative approach at a time when the competition already had all-talking features in production. Work at the Cosmopolitan studio proceeded simultaneously with construction on the West Coast, and on July 24, 1928, it was announced that MGM’s sound production would be divided between New York and Culver City.<sup>92</sup>

Major Edward Bowes, manager of the Capitol Theatre, was placed in charge of the production of shorts at MGM’s eastern studio, an understandable move given that these films were meant to replace the live shows that Bowes and other theater managers had been producing on their own stages.<sup>93</sup> The studio used the sound system developed by Fox and called its films “Movietone Acts” (before Cosmopolitan was operational, the first thirty-seven MGM shorts were actually shot at the Fox-Case studio on 54th Street).<sup>94</sup> As was the case at the old Vitagraph studio, the Cosmopolitan was not easily adaptable to sound film production. The front of the building was only a few feet away from the Second Avenue elevated, while from the other side foghorns and whistles from East River traffic proved even more of a problem for the sound engineers.<sup>95</sup> Attempts to soundproof the upper stages were eventually abandoned, and the space was used to store stage scenery from the Capitol Theatre.<sup>96</sup> One small soundstage was tucked away in the basement. Screen tests were shot here for King Vidor’s *Hallelujah!* on the strength of which Vidor cast Daniel Haynes, then appearing in *Show Boat*, and night club performer Honey Brown.<sup>97</sup>

In November 1928 Alan Crosland (director of *The Jazz Singer*), cameraman Karl Struss, and screenwriter C. Gardner Sullivan arrived at the studio to shoot

an elaborate feature for United Artists called *Say It with Music*. The film was to star Broadway song-and-dance man Harry Richman, with music by Irving Berlin. But after two months producer John Considine brought his crew back to Hollywood, announcing that New York might be acceptable for shorts but was no place for feature-film production.<sup>98</sup> Although he may have been talking about the specific physical problems of the Cosmopolitan studio, Considine's complaints reflected the general view of Hollywood insiders, who were unimpressed by New York soundstages carved out of theaters, loft buildings, and old silent movie studios. On the West Coast, sleek new soundstages were going up all over Hollywood.

Back at Cosmopolitan, Major Bowes and Louis K. Sidney (recently appointed as chief studio executive) proceeded with their program of Movietone Acts. Al Lane was chief cameraman, with Charles Harten on second camera and Saul Midwall and Walter Holcombe assisting. The first films were directed by Jack Noble, but in December production suddenly accelerated when director Nick Grinde was sent out from Hollywood and Ira Morgan returned as chief cameraman. Morgan had been Marion Davies's cameraman when she had worked at Cosmopolitan and had followed her when Hearst moved his operation to California.

Nick Grinde was an eager young B-movie specialist who had been making Tim McCoy Westerns. By the end of the month he was completing eight to ten "acts" a week. "We are making an ordinary act that runs seven minutes on the screen in about four and one-half hours now, and we will improve on that shortly," he told

William Randolph Hearst's Cosmopolitan-International studio was wired for sound and renamed the Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Eastern Studios in 1928, but noise from tugboats on the East River and the adjacent Second Avenue elevated line proved impossible to silence. Bison Archives.



the *Motion Picture News*. This brief amount of time included makeup, rehearsals, and even a test recording. "We have gotten this thing down to pretty much of a science," he admitted. "During the past week we have brought acts over from Brooklyn after they completed their night shows and we had a full record of those acts by four o'clock in the morning."<sup>99</sup> Grinde had the studio working three shifts, and by mid-February he had personally directed 45 films. During slack moments, Capitol Theatre music director David Mendoza recorded orchestral scores for MGM's last silent features, including *Spite Marriage*, *The Pagan*, and *The Duke Steps Out*.<sup>100</sup> By April 1929, MGM had completed 117 shorts in New York, 80 of them at Cosmopolitan.<sup>101</sup>

On March 4 the industry had been shocked to learn that William Fox had acquired control of Loew's Inc. and the MGM studios.<sup>102</sup> *Film Daily* reported that Fox might even transfer some of its own feature production to the newly acquired Cosmopolitan studio, but the move never happened. Instead, within a matter of weeks, the MGM forces were unceremoniously evacuated from New York, completely emptying the studio and relocating both Fox and MGM short-film production on the West Coast.<sup>103</sup> The Fox-Loew's merger eventually came unglued, but it did have the lasting effect of encouraging both studios to abandon New York and consolidate their operations in California.

The contrast between the Metro Movietones and the Vitaphone shorts that Warners had been turning out for more than two years is startling. Most acts were covered in a single shot taken from a fixed camera position. The performers generally appear full figure, often before a simple backdrop. A curtain opens and closes to signal the beginning and end of the number. The technique is similar to that of the De Forest Phonofilms (not to mention the *Dickson Experimental Sound Film* of 1894). Why didn't MGM follow the example of Warners, which had long been using editing and camera movement on its short comedies and musicals? Did Major Bowes consciously want the "acts" to look as much like theatrical performances as possible? Or was the Movietone process itself the problem, because its single-system operation discouraged even the simplest forms of editing? (Ironically, Vitaphone's sound-on-disc system appears to have been much more flexible in this regard, at least in the beginning.) In an attempt to add some texture to their films, later Metro Movietone Revues spliced several acts together and made use of on-screen hosts like Harry Rose and Jack Pepper. But such efforts only made the films that much longer.

Another problem with the Metro Movietones lay in the quality of the available talent. Warners understood that Vitaphone needed to arrive with a splash and signed performers like Al Jolson, George Jessel, Burns and Allen, and the stars of the Metropolitan Opera. MGM tried to produce its series on a budget. "There was a lot of feeling on the part of the artists that we were not paying them sufficiently

at first," Grinde admitted.<sup>104</sup> Instead of Jolson and Martinelli, MGM offered the Five Locust Sisters (Famed Miracle Makers of Harmony), Leo Beers the Whistling Songster, and George Lyons the Singing Harpist. Acts like these might have been perfectly acceptable in one of Major Bowes's theatrical prologues, but not as motion picture headliners. In truth, some of these performers are quite interesting, and their preservation in surviving Movietones is of considerable archival value. The charming harmonies of the Ponce Sisters and the bizarre antics of Fuzzy Knight and His Little Piano offer a very different perspective on late 1920s performance style than one finds in the higher-profile Vitaphone releases.

But MGM was not in business to serve the interests of cultural historians. After the Movietone unit abandoned production at Cosmopolitan in May 1929, the building was never used as a motion picture studio again. Acoustical problems, complications arising from the merger with Fox, and uncertainty about the best way to handle the developing shorts market all conspired to bring its career to an end. Unable to get out of the lease and hoping to recoup some of its reputed \$1 million investment, MGM tried to sublet the studio to other producers, but no one sprang for the \$10,000 weekly rental.<sup>105</sup> MGM, the first of the major studios to return to New York for sound film production, was also the first to quit.

### RCA Photophone

Warners, Fox, and MGM all made their sound films under license from Western Electric, an arm of AT&T, which controlled aspects of this technology common to both sound-on-film and sound-on-disc processes. As the Vitaphone and Movietone demonstrations grew more impressive during 1926 and 1927, the rest of the American electronics industry was quick to take notice. At General Electric's engineering laboratory in Schenectady, New York, Charles Hoxie had been working on the photographic recording of sound since 1920. With a device called the Pallophotophone he was able to record the speeches of such notables as Calvin Coolidge for broadcast over radio station WGY as early as 1922. But General Electric saw little commercial potential in the system until 1926, when it was renamed the Kinegraphone and offered to the motion picture industry as an alternative to Western Electric's system.<sup>106</sup> Unfortunately, Hoxie's device was barely out of the laboratory at a time when Vitaphone was already proving itself in the marketplace. In the spring of 1928 the major studios rejected it and fully committed themselves to Western Electric.

General Electric had created the Radio Corporation of America in 1919, just at the beginning of the postwar wireless boom, and the following year Westinghouse acquired a 20 percent interest in the new corporation in exchange for access to its own radio patents. RCA would operate the broadcasting business while GE and

Westinghouse split the manufacturing of transmitters and receivers.<sup>107</sup> But RCA's executive vice president, David Sarnoff, was continually looking for ways to expand his domain. He had already created the National Broadcasting Company (NBC), the nation's preeminent radio network, and by 1928 he had committed RCA to the development of both talking pictures and television.<sup>108</sup>

As soon as the major studios definitively rejected the sound system proposed by GE, Sarnoff created RCA Photophone to exploit it himself. Ownership of the new organization was divided on a 50–30–20 basis among RCA, GE, and Westinghouse.<sup>109</sup> Unlike De Forest's Phonofilm operation, RCA Photophone was very well capitalized and could take full advantage of its connections to the nation's great electrical companies. A crucial association with financier Joseph P. Kennedy, whose recent Hollywood activities had placed him in control of the small FBO studio, the moribund Pathé organization, and the large Keith-Albee-Orpheum theater chain, gained RCA an immediate foothold in both production and exhibition.

By the summer of 1928 Sarnoff had set up a small studio in RCA's offices at 411 Fifth Avenue, but if Photophone was ever to give Vitaphone any competition in the East, a larger facility had to be located.<sup>110</sup> After considering and rejecting the Bronx Biograph studio, RCA built its Photophone studio at 24th Street and Sixth Avenue and appointed Richard Currier as general manager.<sup>111</sup> At first the studio was offered as a rental facility to independent producers. Tiffany-Stahl shot the sound sequences for *Lucky Boy* here, mainly musical numbers with George Jessel singing "My Mother's Eyes," and did the same for its part-talking Joe E. Brown features, *Molly and Me* and *My Lady's Past*.<sup>112</sup> In November 1928 the Sarnoff and Kennedy interests combined their various motion picture holdings in a new corporation, Radio-Keith-Orpheum (RKO), the last of the great vertically integrated American studios. Now Sarnoff began making short Radio pictures of his own at the Sixth Avenue studio, among them Mark Sandrich's *There Is a Santa Claus*, starring Arthur Lubin.<sup>113</sup>

Eventually, RKO executives decided to concentrate their feature-film activities on the West Coast and make the bulk of their shorts in New York. They opened a larger facility, the RKO Gramercy studios, at 145 East 24th Street early in 1929. The building had a 160 × 70-foot soundstage available for features and another, half that size, designed for shorts. Sound recording equipment was housed in wheeled, soundproof booths, which meant that the monitor could be close to the action instead of isolated in some far corner of the building.<sup>114</sup>

Photophone was an easier technology than Vitaphone to use in theaters because it was a sound-on-film process. It also had advantages over Movietone because it recorded picture and track on separate strips of film (double system).<sup>115</sup> Editing and mixing were never as much of a problem with Photophone as with the early Movietone releases. Despite these advantages, relatively few features were made at the



Gramercy studios: British director Victor Saville made the talking sequences for *Kitty* here at a time when studios in England still lacked their own sound apparatus; Chesterfield produced *Love at First Sight*, a backstage musical with Norman Foster; Olive Shea and Forrest Stanley starred in a college romance, *The Love Kiss*, directed by Robert Snody; and Prudence Pictures made *The Talk of Hollywood*.<sup>116</sup>

Filmmaking was the topic of quite a few late silent features, many of them comedies focusing on the zany antics of caricatured producers, directors, and actors (including *High Hat*, made by First National at the Cosmopolitan studio in 1927). But *The Talk of Hollywood*, shot in April 1929, was probably the first feature to deal specifically with the making of talkies. In fact, it antedates the Broadway premiere of George S. Kaufman and Moss Hart's *Once in a Lifetime* by almost a year and a half. The film deals with a Goldwynesque producer named J. Pierpont Ginsburg ("Motion pictures are only in their infancy," he tells us) and the production of his first talkie, *Is Love a Sin?* Most of the comedy comes from a barrage of ethnic, racial, and sexual stereotyping, as was characteristic of many East Coast films in this period. Whereas Hollywood had already learned to tread warily around the sensibilities of various minority groups, New York films looked to the stage and its much broader tradition of racial and sexual innuendo. "This is a drama—not a fairy tale," Ginsburg complains of his epicene leading man.

Ginsburg's real problem is not so much with his actors as with the sound system he has chosen. At the exhibitors' preview a drunken projectionist mixes up the sound discs, and *Is Love a Sin?* degenerates into a succession of surreal blackouts. If Ginsburg had chosen RCA Photophone, of course, this catastrophe could never have happened, because RCA's system employed optical sound. A very inside joke? The script for *The Talk of Hollywood* is credited to the dialect comedian Nat Carr, who plays Ginsburg, and director Mark Sandrich, one of the Gramercy studio's staff directors. They later filmed a series of Ginsburg comedies there.<sup>117</sup> The rest of the crew were also in-house talent, including cameraman Walter Streng and art director Ernst Fegté (who was working for RKO between stints at Paramount's Astoria studio). Little more than an overgrown short, *The Talk of Hollywood* was mauled by the critics when it was finally distributed by Sono Art-World Wide in 1930. "It doesn't seem possible that anything could be quite so bad, but here it is," cracked *Photoplay*. "Probably you've never heard of the players, and you probably won't again."<sup>118</sup>

Beyond this handful of independent features, the Gramercy studio was kept busy throughout 1929 producing half of RKO's short-film releases.<sup>119</sup> Richard Currier remained as head of production, and Dudley Murphy was brought in as story editor and director, a daring move that resulted in some of the most interesting short films of the early sound period.<sup>120</sup> Murphy was the avant-garde filmmaker who had worked on Gloria Swanson's *The Love of Sunya* and had since been directing in



Hollywood for FBO. His best-known films for RKO, *St. Louis Blues*, starring Bessie Smith, and *Black and Tan*, with Duke Ellington, Fredi Washington, and the Hall Johnson Choir, are remarkable for their attempt to dramatize specific African American contributions to contemporary popular music. By setting the music within a brief dramatic sketch, Murphy presented blues and jazz as organic expressions of rural and urban black culture in America. Although no less dependent on stereotypes than other films of the period, Murphy's work was ambitious and respectful, an echo of the Harlem Renaissance as interpreted by liberal intellectuals like Carl van Vechten (who posed for publicity shots on the set of *Black and Tan* with Murphy and Ellington).<sup>121</sup> Murphy also directed *The Traveler* and *The Burglar*, two of the eight short comedies made at the Gramercy studios by the playwright and humorist Marc Connelly. Connelly, who with George S. Kaufman had written such remarkable Broadway successes as *Merton of the Movies* and *Beggar on Horseback*, appeared in these eight two-reelers the year before his best-known work, *The Green Pastures*, won the 1930 Pulitzer Prize.<sup>122</sup>

Most short comedies in the early talkie period featured familiar silent stars (Laurel and Hardy) or new talent from the vaudeville stage (Burns and Allen). Connelly's films were part of a very distinct genre of New York-produced talkies offering literary celebrities performing their own comic monologues. The first of these was certainly Robert Benchley's *The Treasurer's Report*, filmed at the Fox-Case Movietone studio early in 1928. "I guess that no one ever got so sick of a thing as I, and all my friends, have grown of this treasurer's report," Benchley recalled. "I did it every night and two matinees a week in the third *Music Box Revue*. Following that, I did it for ten weeks in vaudeville around the country. I did it at banquets and teas, at friends' houses and in my own house, and finally went to Hollywood [*sic*] and made a talking movie of it."<sup>123</sup> Benchley subsequently appeared in a string of short comedies for Fox, MGM, and Paramount (some also made in New York) and inspired many of his friends and associates to launch film careers by writing and performing their own material. Marc Connelly, Donald Ogden Stewart, Fred Allen, and even Alexander Woolcott would all try, and fail, to match Benchley's remarkable ability to translate this essentially verbal humor into effective motion picture terms.<sup>124</sup>

In addition to Murphy, other directors working for RKO in New York were Mark Sandrich, Al Boasberg, and John Leo Meehan.<sup>125</sup> Sandrich was a graduate of Columbia University who had been directing Lupino Lane shorts (and at least one low-budget feature, *Runaway Girls* [1928]) on the West Coast. Although he also made the feature *The Talk of Hollywood*, Sandrich spent most of his time in New York directing shorts for RKO's Radiant Comedies series. His career prospered when he returned to Hollywood and directed the three-reeler *So This Is Harris!* which won an Academy Award for RKO in 1933. Later he made five of that studio's classic Fred Astaire musicals, including *Flying Down to Rio* and *Top Hat*. Al Boasberg

was a Hollywood gag man who had worked with Buster Keaton on *Battling Butler* and *The General*, and was later associated with Bert Wheeler and Robert Woolsey and the Marx Brothers. He directed RKO's first Radiant Comedy, *Head Work*.<sup>126</sup> John Leo Meehan had been directing low-budget features for FBO on the West Coast before being appointed assistant production manager of the Gramercy studio in 1929. He directed several of the Marc Connelly comedies, as well as the three-reel Rudy Vallee musical *Campus Sweethearts* and *Age of Innocence*, with Paula True-man of *The Grand Street Follies*.<sup>127</sup>

RKO's West Coast comedies typically featured stars like Mickey Rooney, but its East Coast films (except for the Connellys) were less oriented to specific stars and more dependent on the contributions of writers and directors, an approach generally characteristic of East Coast production. Like other studios, RKO tried to take advantage of its New York facility by looking to Broadway for dramatic material, as well as the usual comic or musical skits. William Le Baron, RKO's head of production, felt that Broadway was the obvious source for talkie material and surprised the industry when he outbid his more established rivals for such hot properties as Ziegfeld's lavish musical *Rio Rita*. But material like that needed to be produced on a grand scale at the larger West Coast studio. At Dudley Murphy's behest, the New York studio did try to film Eugene O'Neill's *Before Breakfast*, an early one-act that had recently been revived at the Provincetown Playhouse. In April 1929 it was reported that Zita Johann would begin production on the film within a matter of days, and on August 27 RKO placed a two-page advertisement in *Film Daily* promoting the release. But by November the production of *Before Breakfast* was being described as "tentative," and the studio's interest in what would have been the first O'Neill talkie evaporated when Murphy left for Paramount.<sup>128</sup>

Another abortive attempt at bringing Broadway to local screens involved George K. Spoor's filming of *Lady Fingers* in a wide-film process called Spoor-Berggren Natural Vision. This was a 63.5mm system designed to produce an enormous screen image of nearly stereoscopic quality. At the Gramercy studio Spoor filmed Eddie Buzzell and the original *Lady Fingers* cast, then showed the result to critics (and RKO executives) on a 30 by 52-foot screen erected on the main stage. "An ordinary sized motion picture was first projected," the *New York Times* reported, "then . . . this film was blacked out and the entire screen was suddenly filled with another picture, Gargantuan in size, with the life-like figures of a dozen chorus girls singing their songs, accompanied by an invisible orchestra. There was a spontaneous burst of applause from the audience."<sup>129</sup>

Spoor was an independent promoter and co-founder of the early Essanay Film Manufacturing Company in Chicago. He had been developing this wide-film process for several years and had shot some impressive footage of Niagara Falls. With Fox promoting its 70mm Grandeur system and other studios also ready to move,

RKO signed with Spoor on the basis of this spectacular demonstration. That summer Spoor's camera was used to shoot a wide-film version of *Campus Sweethearts* at the Gramercy studio, after which it was sent to the West Coast for the production of a feature, *Danger Lights*.<sup>130</sup> But because only one or two theaters were ever equipped for Natural Vision projection, the films were nearly always shown in conventional 35mm versions. *Lady Fingers* was never released at all in the 35mm market, but Spoor appears to have put it to good use in the Spectaculum, a wide-screen attraction he operated at the Century of Progress exposition in Chicago in 1933.<sup>131</sup> Although Spoor failed to market his system through the existing motion picture distribution chain, his concept of a stand-alone venue for these novelty attractions does prefigure the later success of IMAX and other proprietary formats.

RKO maintained a hectic production schedule at its New York studio throughout 1929, announcing a new series of twenty-five two-reel Gramercy Tabloid Pictures on July 31.<sup>132</sup> Two days later it offered producers access to "the Finest Motion Picture Stages in the East" as part of Sarnoff's plan to capture the independent market for Photophone.<sup>133</sup> It was under this policy that *Love at First Sight* and *The Love Kiss* were shot at Gramercy. James Fitzpatrick and Talking Picture Epics used the studio's recording facilities, and MGM shot screen tests there following its exit from the Cosmopolitan studio.<sup>134</sup> The most interesting tenant was Photocolor, which produced a series of shorts here for release by Columbia, including Bradley Barker's *A South Sea Interlude* and *Princess Lady Bug*.<sup>135</sup> Photocolor was a two-color process using a twin-lens camera that simultaneously exposed a pair of images through colored filters, creating red/yellow and blue/green color records. These images were then printed onto duplitized film stock, which carried an emulsion on both sides, and dyed the appropriate color.<sup>136</sup> The success of sound as a technological innovation had immediately been followed by similar efforts with wide film and color, but for a variety of reasons these developments would not be generally accepted for years. Photocolor, one of many two-color processes introduced in the wake of Technicolor's growing popularity in the late 1920s, was soon squeezed out of the marketplace.

RKO's New York studio did produce a great many of the company's early short films, yet these might just as easily have been shot on its large new stages on the West Coast. Sarnoff had other reasons for working in New York. In addition to being the nation's theatrical center, New York was also home to the executive offices of all the major motion picture producers, and it was here that Sarnoff wanted a studio of his own to demonstrate the superiority of the Photophone sound system. The Gramercy studio would also prove valuable as an experimental facility: art director Ernst Fegté and chief sound engineer John L. Cass refined the practice of recording sound under studio conditions, while cameramen Dal Clawson and Walter Strenge devised techniques for lighting their sets with arc lamps, a procedure that had been banished in the first months of sound because of electro-mechanical problems.<sup>137</sup>

Although Fox and MGM had quit New York by the end of 1929, Sarnoff continued to expand in the East. RCA acquired the Victor Talking Machine Company, which had its own sound studio at 114 North 5th Street in Camden, New Jersey, and in November 1929 announced it would move that operation to New York. Three or four new stages would be built next door to the Gramercy studio to accommodate the expanded business.<sup>138</sup> But on December 10 a devastating fire swept through Pathé's uptown Manhattan studio. The worst film studio disaster in American history, it killed eleven actors and technicians, derailed Sarnoff's expansion plans, and abruptly changed the character of film production in the East.

### Pathé Sound Studios

The Pathé studio at 1990 Park Avenue had been quite active a decade earlier, when George B. Seitz and Pearl White were still making serials there. But business had dried up by the end of the silent era and would not revive until the building was wired for sound in 1928. In what was now called the Manhattan Studios, a 100 × 120-foot stage rose the full height of the two-story structure, with offices and dressing rooms situated in balcony areas running around three sides of the building. There was one entrance, at the southwest corner of Park Avenue and 134th Street.<sup>139</sup>

Manhattan Studios leased space to the Prince Film Company, said to be making a version of *Who Am I?* with Natacha Rambova, as well as Malcolm Strauss Productions and the Stanley Advertising Film Company, which was using it for the production of silent industrial films. Then, on September 21, 1928, the entire building was taken over by Sound Studios, Inc., a production entity formed by Pathé and FBO to make talking pictures using RCA's Photophone system.<sup>140</sup> The ubiquitous Robert Kane was installed by Joseph P. Kennedy as president of Sound Studios, Josiah Zuro was brought in as general music director (like MGM, Pathé and FBO also planned to score their silent features in New York), and Joseph Clement was studio art director.<sup>141</sup> Zuro quickly prepared a synchronized score for *The Circus Kid*, an already released FBO feature, and a comic prologue starring George Le Maire was spliced onto it in order to advertise it as a talkie.

Bert Glennon, a highly respected cinematographer whose recent work for Paramount included *Underworld*, *The Last Command*, and *The Patriot*, had been promoted to director by FBO. In the summer of 1928 he made two films in Hollywood, *The Perfect Crime* and *Gang War*; both silent with interpolated talking sequences. Glennon arrived in New York in October to shoot additional talking sequences for *Gang War* and a talking prologue for another completed Pathé feature, *Annapolis*.<sup>142</sup> A week before Christmas, Glennon began work on *Stepping Out*, announced as FBO's



*Syncopation* (1929), shot at the Pathé studio on 134th Street, was the first feature-length musical made in New York.

first all-talking feature.<sup>143</sup> Shot over the holidays in three or four weeks, *Stepping Out* was rushed into release on March 29, 1929. By the time it appeared, its title had been changed to *Syncopation*, FBO had disappeared into Kennedy's new combine, and the film had become the first feature release of RKO Productions.<sup>144</sup>

*Syncopation* was one of many early talkie musicals patterned on the success of the stage plays *Broadway* and *Burlesque*.<sup>145</sup> A pair of workaday vaudevillians, played by Bobby Watson and Barbara Bennett, go from rags to riches and back again. The structure allows the introduction of various musical numbers (indeed, Fred Waring's Pennsylvanians enjoy featured billing, although they have no role in the narrative), with comic relief provided by the unlikely singing and dancing team of Morton Downey and Dorothy Lee. Clark Robinson designed the rather constricted sets, and George Webber and Dal Clawson were behind the cameras. The crew at Sound Studios appears to have cut its teeth on *Syncopation*, rather than first developing expertise on a series of shorts, as Warners and Fox had done. Despite the presence of Bert Glennon, the photography is unremarkable; few close-ups or long

shots relieve extended dialogue sequences, and the setting for the film's most lavish musical numbers (the Club Trianon) is so constricted that Waring's band members have to be stacked three levels high to fit them all on screen. Dialogue and dialogue delivery are as stilted as in any early talkie.

But Glennon—or someone—did make a few simple efforts at using sound for dramatic counterpoint. In the film's second act, as Watson and Bennett are being driven apart by their hard-won success, they throw a party at their new apartment on Park Avenue, where Morton Downey entertains the crowd by singing a few favorites. Watson and Bennett are then seen in the next room, quarreling. At the same time, Downey's voice is heard on the sound track once again, from off-screen, crooning the film's romantic theme, "I'll Always Be in Love with You." The tune is clearly intended as both a reflection of their private thoughts and an ironic commentary on the sorry state of their marriage. But the attempt to balance the sound levels is hopelessly crude; Downey's delicate tenor, which should barely be audible through the closed door, nearly drowns out much of the dialogue. This technical flaw would hardly be worth mentioning if it did not demonstrate so clearly the difficulties that could result from even the simplest efforts to do something out of the ordinary with the sound track. Whatever their skills at this point, the Pathé crew already wanted more than just a photograph of someone talking. By the end of the film the melody returns, this time as non-diegetic underscoring, a rare application of this technique at a time when most other films were still committed to the principle that all sound (including music) must be understood as coming from some on-screen source.<sup>146</sup>

With FBO gone and Radio established in its own studio on 24th Street, Pathé once again had the Manhattan Studios all to itself. In retrospect, it is remarkable how much footage Kane was able to generate in this cramped facility in 1929, most of it photographed by veteran cameramen Harry Stradling and Phil Tannura. He immediately put two more low-budget Morton Downey musicals into production, *Mother's Boy*, directed by Bradley Barker, and Kenneth Webb's *Lucky in Love*. *Mother's Boy* was a musical melodrama of filial devotion, an Irish version of *The Jazz Singer* or *Lucky Boy*, with Downey in the Jolson/Jessel role. A hodgepodge of ethnic stereotyping, the film is probably most remarkable for Downey's soup-kitchen rendition of "Onward, Christian Soldiers." In a front-page review, *Film Daily* dismissed *Mother's Boy* as "stickily sentimental, mawkish in treatment, badly acted, and indifferently produced," a fair assessment.<sup>147</sup>

Pathé canceled the New York production of *The Greenwich Village Follies* and Ben Hecht and Charles MacArthur's *Big Shot*, and moved the Constance Bennett vehicle *This Thing Called Love* to the West Coast.<sup>148</sup> Like all other major producers except Paramount, Pathé would use its New York studio solely for the production of short films and newsreels. But this was no small commitment. Dozens of two-



reel comedies and musicals were turned out, nearly all the shorts Pathé had in the market at a time when this format was not yet seen as artistically and economically marginal.<sup>149</sup>

Not officially part of the company's famed newsreel, the *Pathé Audio Review* was a weekly magazine-style release edited by Terry Ramsaye and Thomas Chalmers. The *Audio Review* also operated out of the Manhattan Studios and often featured local activities with the potential for national interest, like Christopher Morley's Hoboken revival of *The Black Crook*, starring Agnes de Mille and Warren Leonard.<sup>150</sup> Issue 34 featured film pioneer Thomas Armat describing his invention of the motion picture projector and an expressionistic "cinema fantasy" called *Shadows*, filmed beneath the tracks of New York's elevated lines.

The bulk of Pathé's New York output was a series of two-reel comedies with music from unit producers George Le Maire, Harry Delmar, Gordon Bostock, and G. B. Maddock.<sup>151</sup> Because the competition had already signed the most familiar names, Pathé's comedies employed few recognizable stars. Most of the shorts were packaged and sold generically under such institutional labels as "Golden Rooster Comedies," "Melody Comedies," and "Manhattan Comedies," and they featured little-known performers or headliners hired for only a day or two. Evalyn Knapp (later a star of many Hollywood B pictures) was one of the studio's few regulars; better-known players like Sue Conroy (*At the Dentist's*), William Frawley (*Fancy That*), Jimmy Conlin (*A Tight Squeeze*), and Al Shean (*Scared to Death*) would usually appear only once, re-creating comedy routines they had developed onstage. Ginger Rogers, who had just appeared opposite Rudy Vallee in RKO's *Campus Sweethearts*, also made a single appearance for Pathé, starring in *A Night in a Dormitory*, one of Harry Delmar's Melody Comedies, in October 1929. An engagingly offhanded production, the film uses the framing device of a late-night girl's dormitory bull session to justify a series of full-proscenium musical numbers. Thelma White and Ginger Rogers appear as themselves, Rogers singing in Helen Kane style and fronting a chorus line, though she herself does no dancing.<sup>152</sup>

Pathé's New York comedies were made quickly and efficiently. Three days in this single-stage facility were allotted for set construction, and four days for shooting. The average cost of one of Le Maire's two-reelers was \$14,250 versus \$23,000 in Hollywood for one episode of Pathé's "Buck and Bubbles" series.<sup>153</sup> With the operation running so smoothly, Robert Kane left New York in October to run the new Pathé-Natan sound studio outside of Paris, taking several key staff members with him.<sup>154</sup> A new production manager, Fred Lalley, was brought in from the West Coast, but the *Exhibitors Herald-World* reported that "John C. Flinn, vice-president of Pathé, is the real voice behind what happens at the studio."<sup>155</sup> Lalley appointed William Bradley as studio art director and Ted Pahle and Walter Strengé as chief cameramen; Arch Heath joined the directorial staff. An expected merger of Pathé

and RKO had still not occurred, so Pathé extended its lease on Manhattan Studios for another year.<sup>156</sup>

From the beginning, Pathé had drawn on chorus members from various Broadway revues for most of its short musicals.<sup>157</sup> Just like the stars, they would film in the day and work nights onstage at some theater or supper club. Among the first films Lalley put into production was another of Harry Delmar's Melody Comedies called *The Black and White Revue*, a loose assemblage of skits and musical numbers hosted by comedian Harry McNaughton. Delmar was using dancers from *The Little Show* and *Sons o' Guns*, as well as the chorus line from the floor show of the Hollywood restaurant, with music provided by the Eddie Elkins band (also featured in *A Night in a Dormitory*). Shooting on the two-reeler was due to be completed on Tuesday, December 10. Around 9:30 that morning the band was warming up onstage and the dancers were sitting in their balcony dressing rooms, waiting to be called downstairs, when the heat from an enormous arc lamp set fire to a large velvet curtain.<sup>158</sup>

This heavy drapery, approximately 20 × 25 feet, was part of the studio's sound insulation, but it also masked the stage's paint frame, where unused scenery, papier-mâché props, and half-empty paint cans were stored. It was at the rear of the building, just behind the set constructed for the film. Instead of calling in a fire alarm, assistant director Bernard Mahoney ordered the crew to fight the fire while he ran upstairs to warn the performers. The first thing they did was to tear down the smoldering curtain, exposing the highly inflammable paint frame, which immediately burst into flame. The studio quickly filled with smoke and fumes, and the fire spread to the rest of the drapes surrounding the stage. Two electricians, Ernest Flisser and Charles Koerble, ran for the studio's fire hose, but before they could open the valve, they were trampled by the crowd racing down from the balcony.

Koerble was one of eleven fatalities, most of whom were discovered at the bottom of the staircase leading from the balcony to the front door of the building.<sup>159</sup> "I told my brother I had a better job for him over at Famous Players and I begged him to go with me," Koerble's brother told reporters after identifying his body in the morgue. "But he said he was satisfied where he was."<sup>160</sup> The dead included four chorus girls, a prop man, a bookkeeper, three electricians, and a makeup man, Joseph Bishoff. Bishoff was one of a number who reentered the burning building in order to save others, but the woman he was looking for, wardrobe mistress Anna Blier, had already escaped through a back window. The location of the fire had cut off the fire exits on the west side of the building, and two more on the south side were on the opposite end of the studio from the dressing rooms. The fire spread so quickly that even these afforded little chance of escape. Carl Edouarde, who had replaced Josiah Zuro as music director, was in the screening room on the south side of the building when the fire broke out. By the time he heard the commotion, flames were already



After the burning of the Pathé studio on December 10, 1929, which resulted in eleven deaths, stricter enforcement of municipal fire regulations forced many of New York's smaller rental studios to close. Courtesy of Herman Paikoff.

licking at the nearby fire escapes. He broke an ankle leaping from a second-floor window.

Eventually the four-alarm blaze drew nearly every fire engine in the Bronx, most of those in northern Manhattan, and two fireboats docked in the Harlem River. Bodies were laid out in the street under a long black tarp, waiting to be shipped to the morgue at Bellevue. The burning of the Pathé studio was a media sensation. In the lead article on page one, the usually sober *New York Times* wrote as if scripting a B-movie melodrama:

More than one hundred men and women, who reported "on the set" at the Pathé Manhattan Film Studio, Park Avenue and 134th Street, yesterday morning to take part in the recording of a gay song and dance revue, found themselves cast instead in a tragedy in which ten [*sic*] of their number were killed and eighteen injured.

They were victims of a fire which swept the interior of the barnlike old structure with death-dealing rapidity, cutting off escape from all but one exit and transforming the bantering, laughing company in grease paint and work clothes into a fighting, stampeding horde who by their own actions doomed themselves.<sup>161</sup>

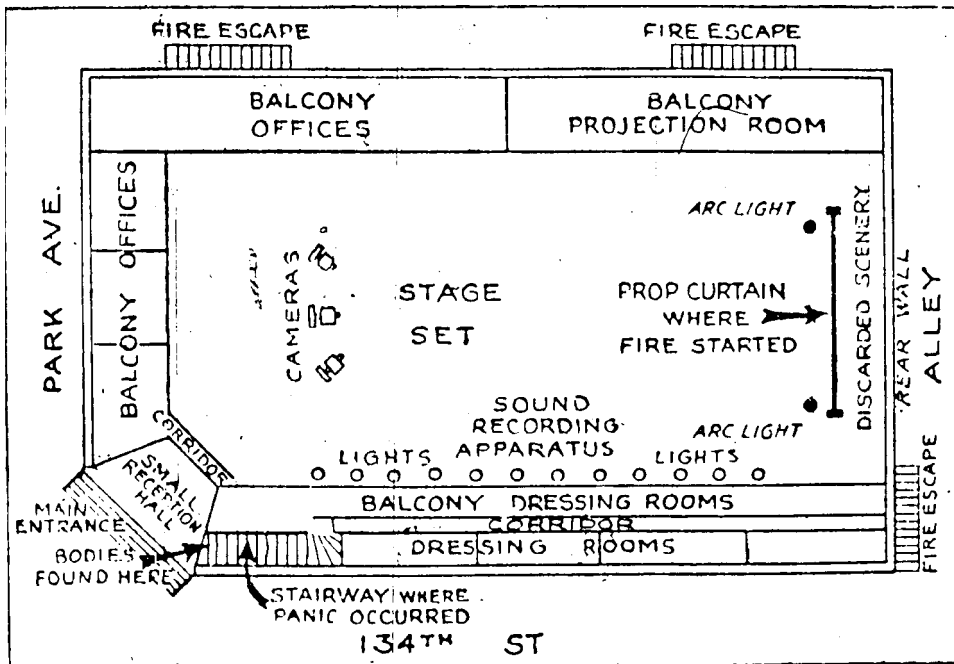


DIAGRAM OF THE BURNED STUDIO.

Three days later the RKO and Warners studios remained closed until 1:00 p.m. in memory of the victims, and Paramount stopped work for five minutes at 10:00 a.m. At midnight on Saturday, Broadway held a benefit for the families of the four chorus girls who died. Clifton Webb, Libby Holman, Jack Donohue, and other cast members of *Sons o' Guns*, *The Little Show*, and *Earl Carroll's Sketchbook* performed; Bea Lillie, Gertrude Lawrence, George M. Cohan, and other celebrities were also in attendance. Although it was a film industry disaster, the theatrical community seemed to feel the loss most personally.<sup>162</sup>

It was clear that the fire would not have spread so rapidly if the studio had been equipped with sprinklers. But fire regulations required sprinklers only if more than five reels of film were stored on the premises. The day after the blaze, production manager Lalley and vice president Flinn (who had been cited as a hero for rescuing his secretary) were arrested on charges of second-degree manslaughter after police discovered 140 cans of film in the building. The following week they were charged again for violating the film storage ordinance. But despite concerted pressure from various city agencies, a grand jury eventually cleared them of all charges four months later.<sup>163</sup>

After the fire Terry Ramsaye immediately moved the *Pathé Review* operation to the Audio Cinema studio in Long Island City, where he installed a new RCA R-3

recorder. To his surprise, he found that production costs here were actually lower “than when we operated at the late lamented and incinerated Sound Studios, Inc. I say this more in sorrow than in anger.”<sup>164</sup> Production of comedy shorts was moved to RKO’s Gramercy studio, but Pathé later announced it would shift this work to the Metropolitan studio in Fort Lee. In fact, its eastern operation never recovered.<sup>165</sup> A few weeks after the fire Pathé’s most active local producer, George Le Maire, died of a heart attack at the age of forty-six.<sup>166</sup>

There were still a few loose ends to take care of, however, including the matter of *The Black and White Revue*, which had nearly been completed before the fire broke out. In order not to waste valuable footage, Harry Delmar put the film back into production in Fort Lee.<sup>167</sup> Seen today in the light of the tragedy, *Sixteen Sweeties*, as the new version was called, is truly shocking, not so much for Delmar’s all-too-evident attempt to save a few dollars by blending shots taken in Manhattan with later footage made on a re-creation of this set in Fort Lee, but for the tastelessness of its comedy sequences. Today there is little surviving evidence of the politically incorrect cabaret and burlesque humor that flourished in New York in the late 1920s. Pathé’s “miniature revues” are certainly valuable for preserving gags that other producers, whose better-known stars appealed to a broader national audience, would never have put on film. Indeed, one of the most interesting aspects of *Sixteen Sweeties* is the amount of time devoted to gay comedy routines apparently lifted from some Greenwich Village supper club. Still, it is painful to watch Harry McNaughton, a survivor of the 134th Street fire, trade an endless series of “death” jokes with two baggy-pants burlesque-house foils. “My mother was a remarkable woman. She had triplets, and two months later she had twins.” “She had triplets and two months later she had twins? How did that happen?” “One of the triplets died.” As comic Bob Carney says before introducing the third or fourth of these gags, “Speaking of people dying . . .” It is unknown if these routines were filmed before or after the fire. What is clear is that Pathé felt it appropriate to leave them in.

The immediate result of the Pathé disaster was a tightening of fire regulations affecting the New York studios. Two months after the blaze, only Paramount and Warners were open for business, and considerable work had shifted to the Metropolitan and Ideal studios in New Jersey.<sup>168</sup> Studios and studio employees alike resisted the city’s demands for the fireproofing of draperies and other studio fabrics.<sup>169</sup> The business manager of Local 644 wrote to Mayor Jimmy Walker asking for relief from the “incessant annoyance of inspectors who are altogether unfamiliar with studio conditions.” Fearing that new regulations would have a chilling effect on the city’s future as a production center, he made one of the first direct appeals for municipal aid based on the film industry’s importance to the local economy. Walker agreed to appoint a committee to investigate the matter.<sup>170</sup>

Eventually many smaller stages did come into compliance, and the old Bio-

graph and Edison studios in the Bronx were successfully revived. But the large new RKO studio on 24th Street never reopened, nor did the Talmadge/De Forest studio on East 48th Street. The problem was not just the fire or the municipal regulations designed to prevent further tragedies. New York's prominence in the production of short comedies and musicals was no blessing at a time when the market for such material was tightening. Low-end producers were being washed out of the short-film market, and only giants like Warners and Paramount would survive.



Jeanne Eagels in *The Letter* (1929), the first talking feature shot in New York. Museum of the Moving Image.



## 6

### Paramount Speaks

#### Astoria Redux

B. P. Schulberg's success at forcing Paramount to concentrate all its production activity on the West Coast proved remarkably brief. Only fourteen months after W. C. Fields, Gregory La Cava, William Le Baron, Walter Wanger, and the rest of Paramount's eastern production unit had vacated the studio in Astoria, Adolph Zukor changed his mind. "We are reopening the Long Island studio and are equipping it for the production of sound pictures because certain types of stories can best be made here in the East on account of the availability of particular types of talent," Zukor admitted, trying his best not to belabor the obvious. Jesse Lasky, as always, was more poetic: "The corpse in Astoria didn't stay dead for long," was the way he remembered it.<sup>1</sup>

Lasky again installed his protégé, Walter Wanger, as executive in charge of the operation. "Mr. Wanger's former show experience, gained through his connection with the stage before he entered pictures, made his selection imperative in view of the similar requirements necessary for a talking picture executive."<sup>2</sup> In fact, Wanger's ten years of film experience was at this point no longer the major factor in his appointment; since the coming of sound, Lasky (and many others) now felt that an intimate knowledge of Broadway was the necessary qualification. Howard T. Lewis, a Harvard professor who made a study of the way Paramount operated in the early sound years, quickly understood the flaw in this reasoning. "There are still on Broadway those who insist that what is a success in Times Square is bound to be a success elsewhere in the country," he wrote in his classic 1933 study, *The Motion Picture Industry*.

There is no particular reason why this should be so, and the bare fact is that the assumption simply is not true. After all, New York City is an artificial environment as far as the bulk of American people are concerned, and Broadway is the most artificial thing in New York. For this reason, if for no other, one might question the relation which box office appeal has as between New York and the rest of the country.<sup>3</sup>

But what was clear to a college professor was not so apparent to the executives in the Paramount Building, who looked out over the entire country from their vantage point on Times Square. In 1928 Paramount was still a highly centralized operation where power flowed from the top. The recent phenomenal success of that corporation validated the judgments, and the prejudices, of a handful of top executives in New York. Always uneasy about having let production slip entirely away from their supervision, they found whatever reasons they required to open up the studio at Astoria once again.

An executive of Wanger's caliber was needed for the successful development of a feature-film program. At the same time, Paramount was not about to neglect the short-film market. Initially, much of the demand for these shorts came directly from the fourteen hundred theaters in the Paramount-Publix chain, all of which had been providing some sort of live entertainment in concert with their film programs. By 1927 the largest of these theaters were hosting "stage unit presentation acts" created in New York and sent on the road like conventional theatrical companies.<sup>4</sup> When sound arrived, Paramount intended to put these acts on film, a strategy that would allow it to cover even the smaller theaters that were doing away with live performances entirely.<sup>5</sup> James R. Cowan, head of the Publix Theatres production department, was put in charge of the short-film department at Astoria, with Larry Kent, from the company's Balaban + Katz wing, as his assistant. An experienced musical comedy veteran named Joseph Santley was to direct.<sup>6</sup> In promoting its short comedies and musicals to theater owners, Paramount made it very clear where the strengths of the series lay:

The fortunate location of Paramount's mammoth Long Island Sound Studio, just a stone's throw from Broadway, gives Paramount opportunities that no other company enjoys in securing and recording of talent. . . . The same production brains responsible for Paramount's leadership in talking feature pictures are producing Paramount Talking Acts. A guarantee to you that they are the class of the market . . . Paramount Two-Reel Comedies. Not slapstick, but the cleverest comedians of the Gay White Way in the type of material that has made them famous. . . . Wit. Singing. Dancing. Beauty. Gayety. An infinite variety of entertainment. Putting every class of theatre, large and small, on Broadway for quality and profits.<sup>7</sup>

Theatrical expertise would be crucial to Paramount's plan, and it would be Wanger who would decide which stories would be filmed and what actors might be enticed from Broadway to appear in them. But Jesse Lasky went in another direction when he hired Monta Bell as associate producer, the man actually in charge of making the studio's feature pictures. Bell had already made one film at Astoria, the Adolphe Menjou comedy *The King on Main Street* (1926). But he was better known for the films he had recently directed at MGM, including Greta Garbo's first Hollywood film, *The Torrent* (1926), and *Man, Woman, and Sin* (1927), with John Gilbert and Jeanne Eagels, an extraordinary essay on contemporary sexual mores heavily influenced by Chaplin's *A Woman of Paris* (1923). Indeed, Bell had been one of Chaplin's assistants on that film, having entered the comedian's inner circle after being commissioned to ghostwrite his 1922 memoir *My Trip Abroad*. Completely forgotten today, Bell was once seen as a major stylist working in the Lubitsch tradition, although the sly misanthropy of his best work, like *Man, Woman, and Sin* or *Downstairs* (1932), is far more suggestive of Chaplin's darker moments.<sup>8</sup>

A journalist with only minor theatrical experience prior to his association with Chaplin, Bell shared his mentor's belief in cinema as a visual language in which the image was everything. He was not impressed with the early talkies produced by rival studios and hoped to liberate the new form in some way. A full year after taking charge of production in Astoria, Bell was still unhappy about what had happened to silent movies. "At the time I came East I did not like talking pictures," he wrote in *Theatre Arts Monthly*. "I do not like them today. This, however, is personal taste. I do not know whether the public likes them or not. I do not believe any one can tell that, because the public is just being fed talking pictures and as long as that is their enforced diet, they are going to take it."<sup>9</sup> The selection of someone like Monta Bell to supervise feature-film production was far more daring than the assignment of Cowan and Santley to handle the shorts, something that became very clear when, still in California, Bell and Lasky hired Robert Florey to direct them.<sup>10</sup>

Florey was another member of the Chaplin group, a French journalist who had never directed a major feature (he had made a few B movies for poverty-row studios) and whose reputation rested entirely on some avant-garde shorts that had startled the Beverly Hills screening-room circuit, notably *The Life and Death of 9413, a Hollywood Extra* (1928). When Florey arrived in New York in the summer of 1928, his experimental films, distributed commercially thanks to Chaplin's endorsement, were playing art house venues like the Cameo and the 5th Avenue Playhouse.<sup>11</sup> (It was not until April of the following year that RKO imported its own avant-gardist, Dudley Murphy, to work at its Gramercy studio.)

Wanger and his studio manager, Johnny Butler, hired the best local cameramen they could find, including Joseph Ruttenberg, Bill Steiner, Al Wetzel, and Ted Pahle, but none was considered an adequate "first cameraman" by Hollywood standards. Many of the most experienced members of Local 644 had moved to California

when activity dried up in the late silent era, an exodus that left a temporary creative vacuum at the top. One of those exiles was George Folsey, who started his career in the East but who had been working in Hollywood since 1925. Folsey happened to be in New York for a family funeral when he was approached about the position of camera department head at Astoria.<sup>12</sup> Because he now belonged to the Hollywood Local 659, the union insisted that he be “covered” by a New York man who would stand by on full salary whenever Folsey worked: Joseph Ruttenberg.<sup>13</sup>

Folsey and Ruttenberg worked as a team on all the major Paramount Astoria features, but the exact nature of their collaboration is hard to define. Ruttenberg was an experienced director of photography who had shot many important films for Fox in New York and New Jersey during the silent days, until he quarreled with William Fox’s brother-in-law Jack Leo and left the company. He was operating a one-man studio devoted to screen tests of Broadway hopefuls (including Helen Hayes and Fred Astaire) when he was recruited for the new Astoria operation. It would seem that Ruttenberg functioned as more than just an operator or second cameraman, yet Folsey was clearly in charge. Folsey is the only cinematographer credited on such films as *Applause* (1929), *Glorifying the American Girl* (1929), and *The Smiling Lieutenant* (1931); Ruttenberg received no screen credit for these or any of the other Paramount features on which he worked. Folsey respected his assistant’s experience and encouraged him to make suggestions during production, but Ruttenberg found his position politically delicate and took pains not to give the appearance of “double-crossing” Folsey by speaking up too directly on his own.<sup>14</sup> In later interviews Ruttenberg did not seem uncomfortable with his secondary status on these pictures, although he was somewhat annoyed at the lack of screen credit. Eventually,

Director Robert Florey shooting “dancing feet” inserts for *Night Club* during the summer of 1928.



both men wound up in Hollywood, where they enjoyed long and successful careers at MGM. Folsey was nominated for an Academy Award twelve times (*Meet Me in St. Louis* [1944] is perhaps his best-known film today), and Ruttenberg took home four Oscars for his work on films like *Mrs. Miniver* (1942) and *Gigi* (1958).

Western Electric completed the first soundstage at Astoria, an enclosed box tucked inside one of the basement stages, on July 16, 1928.<sup>15</sup> As with all such installations, the facility was arranged for the convenience of the sound recordist, not the actors, directors, or cameramen. "They wanted to control all the cycles, to have everything perfect," Wanger remembered.

They built a stage about the size of an average room and wouldn't let us use the big stage. We had to work on their size stage, the walls were thick, and there was no air-conditioning. The stars would go in with their make-up, which would be melted by the time the technicians could shoot. Everyone was dying of the heat. You couldn't move the camera. Everyone was bullied like this for months.<sup>16</sup>

Florey arrived in August and began directing screen tests in the sweltering basement "cave." Actors, explorers, singers, dancers, politicians, comedians, and prize-fighters all came in for their shot at a screen career. "From eight in the morning until twelve at night, New York's celebrities marched through the studio and we recorded them on kilometers of film," he remembered.<sup>17</sup> Production stills show Florey, Bell, and the camera crews working in shirtsleeves, a rare concession to the elements. Florey also directed the occasional short, including the Elinor Glyn monologue *What Is "It"?* during which a dozen pigeons were disastrously turned loose in the cramped soundstage. Finally, Bell approved the production of two three-reel featurettes, *Night Club* and *The Pusher-in-the-Face*, which were distributed by Paramount for the benefit of the Actors' Fund and the Authors' League.<sup>18</sup>

*Night Club*, said to be based on a novel by Katherine Brush, consisted mainly of an impressionistic series of musical numbers. Fannie Brice, Ann Pennington, Tamara Geva, Bobbie Arnst, and other Broadway luminaries sang and danced, and the entire chorus line from *Good News* was somehow squeezed into Astoria's basement soundstage. *The Pusher-in-the-Face* was more conventional, an adaptation of an F. Scott Fitzgerald story starring legendary Broadway comics Lester Allen and Raymond Hitchcock. Most of the action takes place in a re-creation of Henry Miller's Theatre, where Allen is forced to confront numerous audience "pests" during the performance of a mystery melodrama. Obviously intended as experiments in the staging of music and comedy, the films were put on the shelf for a year before appearing on a novelty bill at the Little Carnegie Playhouse (they shared the program with Florey's latest avant-garde experiment, *Skyscraper Symphony*, and Chaplin's 1915 *A Night at the Show*, which received the best notices). Compared with talkies made



in 1929, the two films seemed ancient. “In the years to come this fillum [*sic*] will be held up as a terrible example of what was done by way of experimentation when the sound era first hit the industry,” declared the *Film Daily*. “It’s just a jumbled mess, and about the rudest thing in sound available on the market.”<sup>19</sup> More indulgently, the *New York Times* simply suggested that the actors in *Pusher-in-the-Face* had been sabotaged by “the weird acoustics of the Astoria studio at the time.”<sup>20</sup>

In fact, the technology had progressed so quickly that both films would have seemed obsolete within six months of production. In August 1928 the studio was pleased to record sound frequencies up to 4,000 cycles per second (cps); by December it could record 8,000 and reproduce 6,000 (the human ear was thought to have a range of 16 to 15,000 cps).<sup>21</sup> All through 1928, filming in Astoria was restricted to a single recording channel, which meant that in the whole studio only one sound input could be handled at a time, stifling any director’s efforts at creative treatment of image and sound. Paramount was a Western Electric licensee and by 1928 had access to both its sound-on-film and sound-on-disc recording systems. Both were installed at Astoria, although Bert Granet, who worked in the sound department at the time, remembered that the very earliest films were recorded only on disc.<sup>22</sup> Under these conditions, tests, shorts, and even features had to line up for their chance at the sole recording channel, and production went on day and night.

### First Features

The first all-talking feature to be made in New York, *The Letter*, was shot at the Astoria studio in November and December 1928. The director was Jean De Limur, yet another of Chaplin’s French assistants on *A Woman of Paris*. During the war De Limur had been an ace combat pilot on the Italian front, where Walter Wanger also served as a Signal Corps aviator.<sup>23</sup> Later he worked as “technical director” (which could mean anything from historical consultant to gofer) for Chaplin, Rex Ingram, and Cecil B. De Mille, but he had never directed a film before. In fact, George Folsey remembered Monta Bell as having directed most of the picture. “He did *The Letter*,” Folsey told Irene Atkins in 1979, referring to Bell. “But he did it kind of in the background. I think he was trying to groom De Limur to be a director.”<sup>24</sup>

What could Wanger have been thinking when he assigned the studio’s first talking feature to a fledgling director unfamiliar with the crews, the cast, and the rudiments of sound technology? Perhaps it was always assumed that Bell would take the lead, especially because the film’s tempestuous star, Jeanne Eagels, was someone he had successfully directed at MGM not long before. Eagels was a magnetic personality with a loyal Broadway following, but her well-known problems with drugs and alcohol should have given pause to any sane producer. “She was a very strange woman, I must say,” Folsey remembered. “She must have been on some drugs or

on some other medication or something—I don’t know. But she was very weird and strange. She didn’t know who I was. . . . She was in another world at that time.”<sup>25</sup>

Somerset Maugham’s adaptation of his short story *The Letter* had had a successful Broadway run in 1927, when Katharine Cornell created the role of Leslie Crosbie, the adulterous planter’s wife who still loved the man she killed. Eagels was best known as another Maugham heroine, Sadie Thompson in *Rain*, one of the iconic Broadway performances of the 1920s—a role that Gloria Swanson had recently put on film. Yet despite her personal problems, Eagels never seems to have been responsible for production delays on *The Letter*; something that could not be said about Jean De Limur or the studio sound department. According to Folsey, the studio did not as yet have preassembled “iceboxes” with which to silence the cameras and camera crews:

So we had to make ourselves a box around it, each time we shot a scene. . . . They had little pegs we’d put them in so that they’d go together quickly. We got lots of blankets to cover the camera up . . . get inside this box, have somebody lock the door on it and we could shoot a scene through the window. Now it took a heck of a lot of time to get this thing . . . so the most important thing for me . . . was—was it a sound shot or a silent shot?<sup>26</sup>

De Limur, a quiet and unassuming man, hated the commotion that resulted every time he called for a new camera setup “with sound.” Eventually, when Folsey asked “silent or sound?” De Limur would attempt to minimize the disruption by noting that the scene called for only “a little bit of sound.” Folsey and the other technicians patiently took the neophyte in hand. “We would explain why he couldn’t do this and couldn’t do that and so on. It was fun working with him because he was a great boy, appreciative of our efforts.”<sup>27</sup>

According to a report in the *New York Times*, work had first begun on a “silent” version of *The Letter*, with courtroom scenes being shot on the (un-soundproofed) main stage in the first week of November. The “audible” version of this same sequence would be repeated later in the basement soundstage. A complete silent version was still needed because Paramount estimated that only one thousand of twenty thousand American movie theaters were equipped for sound in late 1928.<sup>28</sup> The motion picture industry would struggle with this “silent version” problem until at least 1931, but the solution proposed at Astoria was especially ingenious. Because it was then considered impossible to film dialogue sequences on the main stage, and the soundproofed stage was too small for the construction of any large sets, only the closer shots were done in the basement. These could be spliced into the silent long shots to create an “audible” version far less claustrophobic than the usual early talkie.

If De Limur really was as ignorant of the problems and possibilities of sound as Folsey remembered, it must have been Monta Bell who gave *The Letter* what,

for 1928, was its remarkably fluid style. The film begins with the camera gliding through the dense foliage of an Astoria jungle, until it reaches the bungalow occupied by Eagels and her husband (played by Reginald Owen). The camera does not move quite so freely during dialogue scenes, but special care was taken so that the actors, at least, could move around the set. Ralph Townsend, director of recording at the studio, was especially proud of the scene where Eagels shoots her lover, Herbert Marshall (who would play the husband in the 1940 remake of *The Letter* starring Bette Davis):

We have got around the necessity for actors to stand in just one single position under the microphone. We have eliminated the unnatural and uninteresting appearance of two characters standing stiffly in front of the camera and speaking their lines. . . . There is vigorous action and movement all around a room; yet the talk goes on throughout, and it has been perfectly recorded. The microphone has been made to follow the voice over just as wide a space as the camera lens can follow. The introduction of real action along with dialogue will be one of the distinctive contributions of *The Letter* to talking picture technique.<sup>29</sup>

Townsend was an acoustical engineer who had previously worked for the Brunswick phonograph label. After only a few months on the job, he had already constructed a theory of sound cinema in which dialogue would take the place of montage. "It has been the established custom to obtain emphasis by means of the close-up," he told reporters. "But now with the addition of sound, it will be possible to get emphasis by sending out the words to impact upon the audience while leaving the characters in full-length position so that their action may go forward swiftly and without interruption."<sup>30</sup>

*The Letter* opened at the Criterion Theatre on March 7, 1929, and was an immediate sensation. Richard Watts Jr. praised its "interesting photography, limpid movement, and frequent camera effectiveness." Although he had already seen such important West Coast talkies as *In Old Arizona* and *The Broadway Melody*, he cited *The Letter* as "the best talking screen play that has yet been devised" and the greatest threat to both the silent cinema and the legitimate theater.<sup>31</sup> The *New York Times* called it "an audible photoplay that defies the derision that has been flung at so many specimens of this type of entertainment. . . . It is the first offering of its kind in which there are true passages of life-like drama."<sup>32</sup> Critics were also impressed by the interpolation of the famous cobra-mongoose battle from the German novelty short *Killing the Killer* (1928). Although the *New York Times* reviewer recognized and identified the sequence, he seemed to feel the intrusion of this documentary footage perfectly appropriate.

Jeanne Eagels was nominated for an Academy Award for her performance in

*The Letter*, making it the first East Coast film to receive such recognition from the Hollywood-based Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. That the award went instead to Mary Pickford, one of the founders of the Academy, led to considerable grumbling and accusations of cronyism. "It gives the impression," wrote one critic, "that the Academy is handing out its cups on a political or social basis."<sup>33</sup> In fact, any award to Eagels would have been posthumous. After finishing one more film in Astoria, *Jealousy*, Eagels died of a drug overdose on October 3, 1929.<sup>34</sup>

With *The Letter* occupying most of the available stage space (and monopolizing Astoria's single recording channel), Robert Florey and Joseph Santley kept themselves busy with short films and screen tests. The first short made at Astoria, *Eddie Cantor; That Party in Person*, had been shot in the basement "cave" in the summer of 1928. Over the next few months cameras were turned on the Giersdorf Sisters, Eddie Peabody, Ruth Etting, and harmonica virtuoso Borrah Minevitch. There were also a few comic skits, including Santley's old vaudeville routine, *One Word*, and a George S. Kaufman farce called *If Men Played Cards as Women Do*.<sup>35</sup>

Florey hustled Admiral Richard E. Byrd into the studio to film a prologue for Paramount's documentary feature *With Byrd at the South Pole*. Standing before a background of velvet soundproofing drapes, the admiral stabbed at a large map of Antarctica with a schoolroom pointer. *With Byrd at the South Pole*, photographed by a local Paramount news crew, won the 1929 Academy Award for cinematography (though not for this sequence). More interesting was *Bon Jour, New York*, Maurice Chevalier's first American film, shot in two days during a brief layover on the singer's first trip to Hollywood. Walter Wanger, an unreconstructed Francophile, was unhappy that B. P. Schulberg and the Hollywood studio were getting first crack at Paramount's imported singing sensation. Florey suggested filming a documentary record of Chevalier's arrival in the city, with French dialogue only, which could be used to promote Chevalier overseas months before Schulberg could get *Innocents of Paris* on the screen. In one of the slickest examples of Florey's "guerrilla filmmaker" approach to commercial cinema, Chevalier was filmed at all the best-known New York landmarks, from the Statue of Liberty to the Astoria studio, then packed off to Hollywood.<sup>36</sup> Although the film could not be released in America, the studio used parts of it as montage material for the "Manhattan" episode of *Makers of Melody*, a musical short featuring Richard Rodgers and Lorenz Hart. Chevalier is clearly visible in long shots boarding a Fifth Avenue bus, and the skyscrapers twirl at odd angles in characteristic Robert Florey fashion.

Production on *The Hole in the Wall*, Florey's first sound feature, began as soon as *The Letter* vacated the stages in December 1928.<sup>37</sup> If *The Letter* had been designed to showcase a major Broadway celebrity in her first sound picture, *The Hole in the Wall* was just another experiment. The original play, already filmed by Metro not long after it opened on Broadway in 1920, was a creaky mixture of crime and spiritualism. Paramount remade it only to check out two performers in whom it had an

interest: Edward G. Robinson and Claudette Colbert. Both had failed to make any impression in silent pictures, but their growing stature on Broadway seemed to call for this extended screen test.<sup>38</sup> Robinson had been specializing in such monstrous characters as Nick Scarsi in *The Racket*, and in this film he already displays the assortment of “gangster” mannerisms that would soon make his reputation at Warners. But Paramount was never very interested in characters like this while Lasky and Wanger were still in charge, and picked up Claudette Colbert’s option instead. She quickly took over Gloria Swanson’s role as “Queen of Astoria,” starring in ten features (twelve, counting multiple-language versions) in the next thirty months. *The Hole in the Wall* was certainly the most modest of these; but because Florey calculated that he had nothing to lose on what was simply a glorified test, it is also the most eccentric, even bizarre. Without much time, space, or money to spend on settings, Florey often resorted to the quasi-expressionistic backgrounds he used in *The Love of Zero* and *Johann the Coffin Maker*, his most recent experimental shorts. When the script called for the crash of a New York elevated train, Florey presents it in the same impressionistic style he employed in *The Life and Death of 9413, a Hollywood Extra* (although the all-too-apparent use of a model train does not work as well here as in Florey’s famous “\$97 masterpiece”).<sup>39</sup>

On top of the usual problems, Florey also had to contend with major physical renovations under way at the studio during the time *The Hole in the Wall* was in production. The heat of summer was replaced by an especially frigid winter when the studio’s heating plant was shut down. Like the only available soundstage, it was located in the basement and was too noisy to operate while sound recording was in progress. Paramount began work on a 50 × 200-foot addition to the rear of the studio, where the electric generators, heating plant, carpentry shops, and other noisy functions might be exiled. This renovation also doubled the available stage space in the basement and allowed set construction to proceed without interruption.<sup>40</sup> A second recording channel was installed in January 1929, and “effective soundproofing” of the large upstairs stage was finally completed. Instead of using hollow tiled walls or heavy drapes, “huge tent-like hangings, arranged to pull up and down in the manner of Venetian window curtains,” were chosen to permit greater flexibility in use of the floor space.<sup>41</sup>

The first film to take advantage of this new flexibility was *The Cocoanuts*, which Florey and Santley co-directed on the newly soundproofed main stage in February 1929.<sup>42</sup> In theory, Santley was there to handle music and dialogue. But Florey had already directed more talking footage than anyone at the studio, including a feature, and Paramount had recently renewed his contract on the basis of his success with *The Hole in the Wall*.<sup>43</sup> There appears to have been a jurisdictional struggle within the studio regarding authority over this property: was *The Cocoanuts* a Broadway adaptation and thus under the purview of Monta Bell, or a musical entertainment for which James R. Cowan and Larry Kent should be responsible?

Eventually, nearly every executive in the studio got his name on *The Cocoanuts*, but for once there was plenty of credit to go around.<sup>44</sup>

*The Cocoanuts* was written by George S. Kaufman and Irving Berlin in 1925 as a vehicle for the four Marx Brothers. A sophisticated mélange of romance, music, wisecracks, and dancing girls, it was exactly the sort of show Paramount was counting on when it decided to reopen the New York studio. Indeed, Zukor and Lasky wound up depending on *The Cocoanuts* even more than they had expected: on January 16, just weeks before the film went into production at Astoria, Paramount's nearly completed West Coast soundstage was destroyed by fire. Although the damage was minimized at the time, the loss of the ambitious four-stage/eight-channel studio building certainly caused the executive hierarchy to regard their New York operation as far less of a sideshow than it had appeared in 1928.<sup>45</sup>

Florey pushed the film through in twenty shooting days and probably would have finished even earlier if the brothers had made themselves more available. Production had to be scheduled around evening and matinee performances of their current show, *Animal Crackers*, and when the stars did show up at the studio, it was difficult to keep them from wandering off the set.<sup>46</sup> Consequently, far more creative energy was devoted to the film's musical numbers than to the brothers' set-piece comedy routines. "All they did was point a camera at us while we ran through our old stage version of *Cocoanuts*," Harpo recalled.<sup>47</sup> But there was not much any director could do when the brothers arrived unprepared. During one scene between Chico and the juvenile lead, Oscar Shaw, Chico could not remember the name of one of the main

Paramount's strategy of using Astoria as a home for working Broadway talent was successfully demonstrated when the Marx Brothers shot *The Cocoanuts* (1929) there during the day while appearing in *Animal Crackers* at the Forty-Fourth Street Theatre every night.





characters, a flub that is very obviously covered by Shaw. There was no time for a retake, and the scene stayed in. At other times the brothers would abandon the script and improvise. Florey had seen the original show two years earlier in San Francisco, but when Groucho and Chico ad-libbed new dialogue he was taken off guard and would laugh uncontrollably. "When he laughed, he laughed so hard he drowned out everything else on the sound track," Harpo remembered. "Laughing left him very weak, so he would have to lie down to regain his strength before he could call a retake." Eventually Florey was forced to direct from inside one of the soundproof camera booths, conveying his orders through hand signals. "When he flew into a fit of silent convulsions we knew we had something good. It was the weirdest audience we ever played for."<sup>48</sup>

Harpo Marx's recollections directly contradict both those of his brother Groucho, who claimed that Florey did not understand English, and those of George Folsey, who felt that Florey, a *grand guignol* specialist, "didn't know what they were doing, he didn't understand their humor."<sup>49</sup> Folsey knew Florey only through his avant-garde films and the expressionistic *Hole in the Wall*. He was unaware of Florey's work with Chaplin and (even earlier) the French comedy pioneer Max Linder. Whenever Florey did have some time with the brothers, he worked directly with Harpo, conjuring bits of silent screen comedy to balance Groucho and Chico's dialogue routines.<sup>50</sup> Groucho, of course, noticed and remembered. He made Florey a target on the set, trying to distract him and disrupt the schedule. "Groucho was an awful tease," Folsey remembered. "Along about 11:30 he'd say, 'Hey Bob, don't forget we got to get to lunch early, so we can get some of those rolls and that nice food. If you get down there too late, all the rolls will be gone . . . with the nice butter. . . .'"<sup>51</sup> Years later, Groucho was still grumbling about Florey. "The director couldn't speak much English" was the way he put it to Richard Anobile. "So we didn't pay much attention to him. That was so ridiculous. Here we are, American comedians, so Paramount gets a French director. They probably had him under contract and decided to give him a job."<sup>52</sup>

Unable to do very much with his stars, Florey turned his attention to the musical numbers. Because of the continuing popularity of the Marx Brothers, *The Cocoanuts* is still widely available in a variety of home video formats, one of the earliest sound films accessible to general audiences. Most modern critics tolerate the film as a relic, a photographic record of a 1920s Broadway show, with the less said about the musical numbers, the better.<sup>53</sup> But compared with such earlier musicals as *The Singing Fool* (1928) or *Syncopation* (1929), the musical numbers in *The Cocoanuts* are always striving to move beyond their theatrical origins. Indeed, the studio saw *The Cocoanuts* as a clear break from the earlier experimental period, when everything was done for the convenience of the sound recordist. "That was the first picture we made at Long Island without Western Electric hanging around," Wanger remembered.<sup>54</sup>

Florey signals his intentions as soon as the main title hits the screen: instead of

large blocks of text against a nondescript background, the credits appear against footage of the dancing Gamby-Hall Girls printed in negative. The film proper opens with an unseen vocal chorus singing Irving Berlin's "Florida by the Sea," accompanied by a montage of artfully posed visuals. No part of this number features any of the principals, and none of the sound is synchronous. The few moments of the Gamby-Hall Girls in swimsuits performing calisthenics before a painted backdrop of surf and palm trees must have been staged as a conventional chorus routine. But as released, the number seems closer to Florey's *Skyscraper Symphony* than to anything previously seen in a movie musical. Later in the film the chorus returns for the "Monkey Doodle Do" number, which by convention should have been filmed from an approximation of "the best seat in the house." Florey instead shot much of it from atop a ten-foot-high camera platform, which allowed him to tilt down on the massed ranks of dancers during the performance. Most notably, in an untitled number staged just before the conclusion, the camera observes the chorus from directly overhead. Florey instructed Joe Ruttenberg to rig the camera in the rafters, reducing the performance to an abstract visual pattern unlike anything possible onstage. "It was quite a job getting the camera up there, so to make it easier we shot the scene silent and added the sound later," Florey remembered. "Other shots were achieved by placing the camera in a pit around the stage and shooting through the legs of the dancers with a long lens."<sup>55</sup> Busby Berkeley would not use such stylized camera angles in Hollywood for another year; their appearance here, consistent with Florey's reputation as an experimentalist, was often inexplicable to the crew. "He was more interested in making flower arrangements with the girl dancers opening up like a lotus leaf and all that business," was the way George Folsey put it.<sup>56</sup>

Even in the film's narrative sequences, when important plot information is being set up, Florey has the camera do what it can to help hold our interest—so long as the Marx Brothers are not involved. Early in the film a few brief scenes establish the characters played by Kay Francis, Mary Eaton, Oscar Shaw, and Margaret Dumont. These are generally played in long takes (as favored by Ralph Townsend, the chief recording engineer), but always involve some form of camera movement. The Kay Francis sequence begins as a long shot, tracks in to a medium shot, and then to a two-shot of Francis and her co-conspirator, Cyril Ring. The next scene introduces Mary Eaton and Oscar Shaw, the juvenile leads, also in one long take; but here the camera moves in closer so that Shaw can sing "When My Dreams Come True" (accompanied by an off-screen orchestra, of course). That scene is immediately followed by the introduction of Margaret Dumont, who quarrels with Mary Eaton about her interest in Shaw. As they walk from right to left across the set of the hotel lobby, the camera not only pans with them (relatively easy from within an enclosed camera booth), but also tracks to the left for several feet. To end the film, Florey dissolves from an emblematic shot of the four Marx Brothers waving at the camera

to one where the camera tracks in to a close-up of Mary Eaton singing a reprise of "When My Dreams Come True." Few critics have ever noticed these slight movements, which are clearly limited by the size of the sets, and most characterize the film's style as static and unimaginative.<sup>57</sup> Yet these scenes demonstrate that considerable effort was already under way at Astoria to return to the fluid style of silent cinema. Moreover, the crews had achieved much of this progress well before production began on Rouben Mamoulian's highly acclaimed *Applause* that June.

*The Cocoanuts* is said to have run 140 minutes at the preview. According to Walter Wanger, the brothers were so unhappy that they wanted to buy back the film to keep it off the market (as Groucho claimed they had done with *Humor Risk*).<sup>58</sup> Yet after being cut to about 95 minutes, it became a tremendous hit, not only in New York, but across the country. "Exhibitors complained that the Marx Brothers talked too fast," Wanger remembered, suggesting that New York in-jokes and Lower East Side patois were a barrier between the Marxes and a national audience. But because "[p]eople had to come back two or three times to catch what was being said," a potential liability was turned into a selling point, at least in this case.<sup>59</sup>

In 1925 Paramount had begun work with Broadway impresario Florenz Ziegfeld on an elaborate silent musical to be called *Glorifying the American Girl*. Over the years many names would be attached to this project, from Follies graduate Louise Brooks to director Erich von Stroheim, recently in demand due to his successful production of a silent operetta, *The Merry Widow*.<sup>60</sup> But Paramount never came up with anything beyond the title, and *Glorifying the American Girl* seemed a dead issue until talking pictures, and the newly reopened New York studio, caused it to spring back to life. With *The Cocoanuts*, the studio had acquired a proven script and a team of popular players, but the value of *Glorifying the American Girl* rested entirely in its association with Ziegfeld's lavish theatrical presentations. In an attempt to create a cinematic equivalent of the "Ziegfeld idea," Paramount cast the film with unknowns and spent lavishly on costumes and visual effects. Technicolor cameras were brought in for the revue numbers, the only time they were used in the East during this period.<sup>61</sup> J. P. McAvoy, who had written two earlier editions of the *Follies*, came up with a script, and silent screen veteran Millard Webb was brought in to direct.<sup>62</sup>

The result was far from the unqualified success of *The Cocoanuts*. McAvoy's scenario, the tribulations of an ambitious vaudevillian, was already a cliché when *Glorifying the American Girl* went into production in April. Millard Webb later married the film's star, Mary Eaton, but the public failed to share his enthusiasm for her.<sup>63</sup> Instead, the studio tried to compensate by creating lavish settings, including interiors of Grand Central Terminal and the New Amsterdam Theatre, and several days of location filming took place on the shores of Lake Success in Manhasset, the first time location sound was ever attempted in an East Coast picture other than a newsreel.<sup>64</sup> Principal photography ended in May, but the rough cut was so disappointing that three major sequences were later added to boost the film's marquee

power—specialty acts featuring Eddie Cantor, Helen Morgan, and Rudy Vallee, shot like musical shorts and spliced into the main attraction. Even the Technicolor revue numbers, designed by John Harkrider and staged by Ted Shawn, were out of fashion for screen musicals by the time the film finally appeared in January 1930.<sup>65</sup> About the only thing critics found to praise was the opening number, an impressionistic rendering of the Ziegfeld favorite “A Pretty Girl Is Like a Melody.” “Considering the time, money, brains, and energy expended on it, it is, of course, a disappointment,” wrote one critic. “But . . . there are some extraordinary synchronized multiple dissolves in the first scenes which show a road that the talkies may take if they want to go into expressionism and other bypaths.”<sup>66</sup>

Robert Florey, the studio’s resident expressionist, may or may not have had anything to do with this part of *Glorifying the American Girl*. After *The Coconuts*, he had been assigned to co-direct what should have been an ideal project, an original Cole Porter musical set in Paris during the war and starring one of the great theatrical personalities of the 1920s, Gertrude Lawrence. But the studio never saw the film as more than a second-tier project, and *The Battle of Paris*, as it was eventually called, would be the last film Florey ever shot in Astoria.

Florey’s co-director was John Meehan, an ex-journalist who was being groomed by the studio as a potential writer-director. He was the author of *Gentlemen of the Press*, which had been filmed at the studio a few months earlier, and had recently completed on his own a two-reel Walter Huston drama called *Two Americans*.<sup>67</sup> Because of the expansion of the studio building and the availability of

The exterior set for *The Battle of Paris* (1929) was tucked into the small back lot behind the main studio building in Astoria. The same set, redressed as turn-of-the-century America, soon appeared again at the beginning of *Applause*. Museum of the Moving Image.



additional recording channels, two films could now be shot simultaneously at Astoria. Unfortunately, it was clear from the beginning that *The Battle of Paris* would be number two. Photography was assigned to the relatively inexperienced Bill Steiner, not George Folsey, and only a week before the start of production the trade papers were listing Bea Lillie as the star.<sup>68</sup> Florey claimed that Meehan was removed from the film after the first three days and that he was then forced by Monta Bell to take over the project.<sup>69</sup> Although it is true that Florey received sole screen credit, press accounts list Meehan as co-director until nearly the end of shooting.<sup>70</sup> Florey did what he could to distance himself from the film and, along with most critics, blamed its problems on a weak script. But given his ability, in films like *Murders in the Rue Morgue* (1932), to create a convincing Parisian atmosphere out of little more than smoke and mirrors, the lackluster quality of *The Battle of Paris* is hard to explain. "It is doubtful that any of the well-established stage stars have ever been forced to put up with the sort of movie rubbish that has been handed Gertrude Lawrence in her first talking picture," wrote one out-of-town critic. "Excepting a couple of sparkling songs written by the clever Cole Porter, Miss Lawrence gets less than nothing in the way of material."<sup>71</sup>

#### "The Greatest Film Paramount Ever Made"

In addition to the indignities of working with the studio's second-string technical crews, Florey was also forced to work the night shift, shooting *The Battle of Paris* from eight at night until five in the morning (some journalists saw this as a blessing during the summer heat wave). Often he would be leaving for home just as the day-shift director, Rouben Mamoulian, was walking in the door.<sup>72</sup> Mamoulian was one of the stars of the Theatre Guild, still basking in acclaim over his staging of *Porgy*, DuBose Heyward's stylized folk drama. When he arrived in Astoria in 1929, he was clearly the directorial prize of Lasky and Wanger's Broadway recruitment raids. If George Abbott and George Cukor were hired for their record of box-office successes, Mamoulian was seen as an artist and was expected to perform accordingly.

In many later interviews, Mamoulian always told of how he rejected Lasky's offer of a seven-year contract with options. The first two years would have been spent as a dialogue director, with practice on short films before moving up to features (in effect, what John Meehan and George Abbott had been doing). Instead, it was agreed that he would observe production at the Astoria studio before a decision would be made on whether or not to give him a feature of his own to direct. Mamoulian was very specific in citing the two films he observed: Herbert Brenon directing *A Kiss for Cinderella*, and Jean De Limur directing Jeanne Eagels in "something by Somerset Maugham."<sup>73</sup> Mamoulian may have observed the filming of *A Kiss for Cinderella*, but this film was made at Astoria in August and September 1925, when he was still



directing opera at the Eastman Theatre in Rochester. It is also unlikely that he spent much time on the set of De Limur's Maugham film, *The Letter*, because he was then in rehearsal on a play, *Wings over Europe*. If anything, he would have observed De Limur's next Jeanne Eagels film, *Jealousy*, which was made in April 1929.

According to Robert Florey, Mamoulian did spend a great deal of time on the set of *The Cocoanuts* in February and March 1929. "Rouben Mamoulian came to the studio regularly and we became great friends. He was going to direct Helen Morgan. . . . Within a few days the camera had no secrets from Mamoulian. He was especially interested in certain shots that I had invented, formations of girls seen from on high, giving the illusion of a bouquet of flowers opening and closing."<sup>74</sup> But when historian Joe Adamson cited a similar recollection by George Folsey and asked Mamoulian if he had seen any of the filming of *The Cocoanuts*, the response was a flat "No."<sup>75</sup> This detail is important because Mamoulian always boasted that his grasp of film technique was *sui generis*. "I learned the mechanics of film-making in five weeks of wandering in the Astoria studio, watching other directors shoot and asking questions. May I say that most of what I learned about films I learned in reverse. That is, I learned what not to do."<sup>76</sup>

In one interview after another, Mamoulian pictured himself as a quick study—quicker, in fact, than the men who were teaching him. "George Folsey was a great cameraman, even then," he admitted. "I would ask him about lenses and he would explain to me, 'This is a 45[mm], take a look, see what it does.' After five weeks I said, 'Now I am ready.'"<sup>77</sup> Production on Mamoulian's first film began on June 14, 1929, a month behind schedule, but a month that had been well spent on preparation and design.<sup>78</sup> "At the moment, at the Long Island Studio, we are making a picture called *Applause*," Monta Bell wrote in *Theatre Arts Monthly*. "This picture has been designed, prepared and is being executed as a motion picture. In it we will use dialogue and sound effects to heighten the movement of the picture."<sup>79</sup> As far as Bell was concerned, this production was what the previous year's work had all been leading up to.

Mamoulian had stumbled on a property owned by the studio, a backstage novel by Beth Brown. Yet another sentimental tale of theatrical lowlife, it offered nothing but the chance to use this milieu to underscore the tragedy of its heroine, a faded burlesque queen. If the film succeeded at all, it would not be because of the clichéd characters or situations, but only because Mamoulian could somehow show these characters as an extension of the world they lived in—a trick not yet accomplished in talking films. Indeed, among the few films ever cited by Mamoulian as an influence on his early style were Lubitsch's *The Marriage Circle* and Murnau's *The Last Laugh* (both 1924), silent masterworks in which character is clearly defined by environment.<sup>80</sup> "As a preliminary education I went to all the burlesque houses—the story revolved around burlesque in New York," Mamoulian told an American Film Institute seminar.





Theatre Guild director Rouben Mamoulian poses with Ziegfeld favorite Helen Morgan during the production of *Applause* (1929). Museum of Modern Art/Film Stills Archive.

Frankly, it made me sick in the stomach, this kind of titillation. The audiences were ugly. The girls were bored. The whole thing was tawdry, shoddy, unworthy of a human being, woman or man. I thought, “A whorehouse is healthier than that.” So I said, “No. I don’t want to touch this darn thing.” And then I said, “Why not? I’m going to touch it and show how sad it is.”<sup>81</sup>

When Paramount’s executives decided on Brown’s novel to showcase the glamorous Helen Morgan, star of Ziegfeld’s *Show Boat* and a favorite of New York’s supper club set, it is unlikely that they imagined it would be treated in the style of Erich von Stroheim. Indeed, the script developed by Mamoulian and Garrett Fort was no more downbeat than that for *The Dance of Life*, a similar backstage melodrama then in production at Paramount’s West Coast studio. But the film took on its real character only during production, when Mamoulian addressed specific issues of mise-en-scène—costuming, makeup, cinematography—and that was when the studio apparatus balked. “I called the wardrobe man . . . I said, ‘Helen Morgan is playing an old burlesque dancer, she should look very sloppy.’ And here she comes up on the stage, and she is looking radiant, beautifully dressed. I said, ‘What is this? I told you she should look very sloppy.’ He said, ‘She is a star, she must be beautiful.’”<sup>82</sup>

Mamoulian had seen George Folsey move the camera short distances in *The Cocoanuts*, but for this film he wanted to move it the way Lubitsch and Murnau had done, creating three-dimensional screen space by floating through the set, directing the audience's attention, allowing whole scenes to play in unbroken takes. Folsey knew that the split-second timing required to accomplish such effects in a silent picture would be infinitely more complicated with sound. Adopting the same paternalistic attitude he had taken with Jean De Limur, he told Mamoulian it couldn't be done in the time they had available.

The final straw came when Mamoulian suggested to the sound department a completely different way of recording a simple two-character dialogue. The studio was already using multiple microphones to cover a scene. The outputs from these mikes fed directly into a mixing panel controlled by the sound monitor, who mixed the sound for each scene as it was being played, turning down one microphone while raising another. That signal was sent to the recording console in the basement. The liabilities of such live mixing can be seen in a film like *Syncopation*, where an acceptable balance was never achieved in the scene cited earlier, where an off-screen song was recorded simultaneously with an on-screen dialogue. In *Applause*, Helen Morgan was to sing a lullaby while her character's daughter, played by Joan Peers, says her prayers. How to record this so that the effect would be both distinct and realistic? There already were two microphones on the set; what Mamoulian wanted was for the output of each microphone to be recorded separately, a demand that required the use of two separate recording channels. The two sound tracks might then be balanced correctly during postproduction.<sup>83</sup> The problem with this idea was that the studio had only three or four channels available for direct recording. If Mamoulian was using two channels, someone else in the studio would not be able to use any.<sup>84</sup> The sound department said no.

That got me really angry. I had a small megaphone—we used to have megaphones in those days—and I threw it on the floor. I ran upstairs. It so happened that Mr. Lasky and Mr. Zukor, Monta Bell and Walter Wanger were all having an important meeting. I ran in. The secretary went pale: I must have looked like Hyde, you know, full of hostility. I walked in the door and I told them, "Now look, nobody does anything I tell them. Am I the director or not? You're paying me money. I'm supposed to direct this film. Why don't they do it?"<sup>85</sup>

The various department heads were summoned and defended themselves. As experienced professionals, they all felt they were acting in the studio's best interests, saving time and money, and protecting the value of the star. But because custom obliged them to back up their director, the executives ordered the scene shot the way Mamoulian wanted. Then they waited for the rushes the following morning.

"I made two takes," Mamoulian remembered, "and then I went to my hotel at the Novarro, and I couldn't sleep all night and I thought, 'This will be my last day in films.'" The next morning, at least in his recollection, Mamoulian was warmly greeted by a studio doorman who previously had not even recognized him as a corporate employee. Word had spread through the building that the test was a success. "They liked it so much they sent it to Kansas City, where there was a convention of Paramount salesmen, to show them the new product!"<sup>86</sup>

Was Mamoulian's triumph really as neat as this? Perhaps not, but something did happen after the first few days of shooting that changed everyone's opinion of the new director. "Mamoulian nodded and chewed his cigar," wrote one trade paper reporter on his first visit to the set. "He's a man full of nervous energy and cannot sit still for a minute. He knows what he wants and gets it. With a moving camera he takes a number of shots (including several gradual closeups to emphasize a point) in a single scene without a cut." Yet this remarkable observation is followed by a pointed disclaimer: "It's probably a matter of opinion, but it seems that he would get better results if he had a crane like that of Paul Fejos's to work with."<sup>87</sup> (The reporter probably picked up these complaints from the crew.) There had been considerable interest recently in Universal's *Broadway*, for which director Paul Fejos constructed a huge camera crane with a forty-foot arm and raced it through enormous sets during elaborate musical numbers. And here was Mamoulian, trying for the same effects with jury-rigged equipment and a recalcitrant crew.

One week later, the same paper was reporting on Mamoulian's suddenly enhanced standing at Astoria. "Rouben Mamoulian is very much the big shot over at Paramount these days. Everybody stands around and admires while he puts Miss Helen Morgan and her supporting cast through their paces."<sup>88</sup> Whatever Mamoulian was doing, he had become the darling of the studio. Caroline Gutknecht, an executive secretary, remembered delighted staff members exclaiming, "Rouben sure does have a nice angle on that!" every time rushes were screened.<sup>89</sup> Putting his newfound authority to good use, Mamoulian demanded a full range of camera effects. Silent cinema had often made use of "wipes," where one image appeared to edge another off the screen. Mamoulian's call for wipes within dialogue scenes on *Applause* was beyond the capacity of the lab to handle in postproduction, so these scenes all had to be done on the original negative, as in silent days—but the conventional means of achieving such effects could no longer be used. Instead, technicians had to stand outside the iceboxes, pushing giant squares of black cardboard back and forth across the camera's field of vision.<sup>90</sup> Mamoulian even forced his crews out of the studio, filming in Pennsylvania Station (without a permit) and atop the AT&T Building, where a small plane flew low to buzz the actors (also without a permit).<sup>91</sup> Most impressive was a crucial dialogue scene in the Chambers Street Brooklyn-Manhattan Transit subway station, shot between midnight and 6:00 a.m. with a crew of forty-five technicians and two hundred extras.<sup>92</sup>

Paramount was so taken with Mamoulian's "angles" that the studio based much of the film's promotional campaign on its cinematography. "The new technique is the very thing that other directors have wanted to use, but never had the courage to attempt—the moving camera," boasted the film's press book. "Mamoulian has taken the camera out of its old status of stationary recording of events that moved in front of it. He has carried its projection around to sweep each vital detail of a scene, to gather in every item pertaining to set, action, and actor. His camera sweeps about, moving hither and yon, just as the eye would do in real life."<sup>93</sup> In an interview with the *Exhibitors Herald-World*, Mamoulian asserted that sound pictures, with their lack of title cards, called for the use of long sequence-shots in which camera movements take the place of editing. "The traveling camera is the basis of his experiment and studio officials are enthusiastic in their praise of his work to date," the paper reported, citing *The Last Laugh* and *Variety* as nominal precedents. "The prediction is freely made that Mamoulian's plan will bring into existence an entirely new screen technique."<sup>94</sup>

None of this publicity ever mentioned the studio's complicated innovations in multitrack sound recording. And Mamoulian's insistence on deglamorizing Helen Morgan's "sloppy" character, to which the twenty-nine-year-old actress had fearlessly acceded, was directly contradicted by the film's promotional campaign. Posters for *Applause* featured a slinky torch singer in a low-cut gown, not the "old burlesque dancer" of Mamoulian's film. The advertising department, like the technical crew at Astoria, was trying its best to save the film. Mamoulian had wanted to show "New York with all its beauty and all its ugliness, burlesque with its tawdriness, vulgarity and sadness. At the same time, I wanted to show that even in a garbage dump a beautiful flower can grow."<sup>95</sup> Unfortunately, film audiences of the 1920s were

Edna Rollins, Mildred Califano, and Helene Turner in an editing room at Astoria during the early 1930s. The building visible outside the window is today the Museum of the Moving Image (which supplied this photo).



not prepared to see this kind of grittiness on-screen, and the handful of films that dared to picture life as a garbage dump had all failed miserably at the box office.<sup>96</sup> Trade paper editor Martin J. Quigley felt obliged to point out the problem:

Paramount's courage and enterprise in getting Rouben Mamoulian "fresh from his triumphs with *The Theatre Guild*," as we are told, is to be admired. But after all, Theatre Guild productions and productions for the million who attend motion picture theaters are two different matters, with different possibilities and limitations. Mr. Mamoulian in directing *Applause* seems to have been so steeped in Theatre Guild tradition that he lost sight of the various restrictions as to subject matter and treatment which cannot be successfully avoided in the making of a motion picture. The enthusiasm of the artistic and the arty concerning *Applause* will probably be boundless. The adverse criticism of the rank and file of motion picture patrons will probably be similarly unmeasured.<sup>97</sup>

"I got a call from Mr. Zukor and Mr. Lasky to see them in his [Zukor's] office in the Paramount Building in New York," Mamoulian remembered:

Mr. Zukor said, "Here," and he made me sit in his chair. Like royalty. "Sit on my throne." He told me that this was the greatest film Paramount ever made, this was a new beginning—he said I should take a good rest for two weeks and after two weeks I was to come back and sign the best contract to make pictures for Paramount. They said, "We want you to know this before the picture opened, so that regardless of the reviews, you know that you have a contract here."<sup>98</sup>

They never called. It would be more than a year before Mamoulian worked for Paramount again, and then on the West Coast, with glamorous stars, on a conventional gangster film that could support his occasional efforts at experimentation. The failure of *Applause* and several of the films that preceded it did not mark the end for the newly reopened Astoria studio, but it did coincide with a change in management. Executive control of production passed from filmmakers like Monta Bell to bureaucrats brought in from Paramount's theater division.

During the summer of 1929 Paramount was deeply involved in secret merger negotiations with Warner Bros.<sup>99</sup> Warners had been edged out by William Fox in an effort to gain control of Loews-MGM earlier that year and so sought a link with Paramount to protect itself against the presumed Loews/Fox colossus (a deal later voided by the U.S. Department of Justice). It is unclear how a merger between Warners and Paramount might have affected the fate of production in the East, though

it seems unlikely that the new organization would have required two studios in New York. The merger never happened, but Paramount was clearly preparing for it by rationalizing its eastern production, replacing Monta Bell with James R. Cowan and bringing in John Fingerlin as his executive studio manager in place of John Butler.<sup>100</sup>

The changes were not popular on the floor. "Fingerlin had been an accountant, and they put him in charge of the Long Island studio, and he didn't have any more idea of what was going on than you can shake a stick at—he couldn't understand, didn't know what I was talking about," George Folsey remembered. "I tried to show it to him. . . . But no way, I couldn't get to him."<sup>101</sup> As far as Joe Ruttenberg was concerned, "They were all amateurs":

They didn't know a thing. What was his name—Fingerlin? We called him something else. He didn't know nothing about a studio. He was an accountant for the theaters. And they brought him in, gave him a big salary, and made him the whole head of the studio and he knew from nothing! You'd ask him a question and he'd say, "Yes," and then go upstairs to see if he could find out.<sup>102</sup>

During the year Monta Bell was in charge, the studio produced ten features and forty-eight shorts.<sup>103</sup> This emphasis on features was unique in the East, where the other major producers expressed little or no interest in anything but short musicals and comedies. Walter Wanger's mission had been to scour Broadway for future Paramount stars, not to make two-reelers with people like Jeanne Eagels, Claudette Colbert, and the Marx Brothers. Despite the enthusiasm of early announcements, the studio's short-film division had always been on the back burner. Eddie Cantor made several successful shorts, but he had already failed as a feature comedian in silent films. Ruth Etting, Fred Allen, Eddie Peabody, and Rudy Vallee, all of whom appeared in at least one Astoria short that first year, were never considered feature-film material by Wanger. Indeed, they were not even under exclusive contract and also worked for Warners and RKO.

The features Monta Bell made for Wanger represented a far more ambitious project—not just canned replacements for theatrical prologues, but an attempt to create "an entirely new screen technique" by blending Broadway with silent cinema. But for all the effort that Bell, Florey, Mamoulian, and the others put into it, there had been very little commercial payoff, and Paramount now declared the experiment over. "Sound films frighten me, and I must say I prefer the silent medium," Bell wrote at the end of his tenure at Astoria. "I do not believe sound pictures will be a passing fad, but their treatment during the past two years is a passing fad. There is too much dialogue."<sup>104</sup> He was given a new contract that would allow him to produce a few specific films, but the job of supervising the studio's entire output was clearly destined for more conventional hands.



### A Miniature Hollywood in Astoria

Warners had decided to maintain its Brooklyn studio solely for the production of shorts, and it kept staffing levels low in accordance with the films' modest financial requirements. Things were different at Paramount, which was primarily interested in making features in New York and produced an average of one feature a month during the early sound period. But this output was not enough to justify the overhead of the large building complex in Astoria. As features went in and out of production, stages would go unused, and contract personnel often found themselves with time on their hands. Maintaining a healthy short-film schedule not only provided Paramount with one- and two-reelers for its distribution arm, but also proved to be an efficient means of filling this downtime.

Through 1929, Paramount, like its rivals, had continued to offer dramatic shorts as part of its program mix. Many of these were obvious testing grounds for writers, actors, and directors. For example, Walter Huston appeared in three: *The Bishop's Candlesticks* and *The Carnival Man*, both directed by George Abbott in late 1928, and *Two Americans*, written and directed by John Meehan in March 1929.<sup>105</sup> Abbott was rewarded with a trip to the West Coast to direct George Moran and Charles Mack in a blackface musical, Meehan was put onto *The Battle of Paris*, and Huston himself starred in two subsequent Astoria features. When RKO shut down production in the East, Paramount hired Dudley Murphy to continue his series of musical dramas investigating the roots of American popular song. In December 1929 Murphy completed *He Was Her Man*, a two-reeler suggested by the notorious ballad "Frankie and Johnnie," which featured silent star and shimmy dancer Gilda Gray.<sup>106</sup> But sophisticated material like this had no place in Larry Kent's short-film program. The discovery of the body of a prominent broker's wife in Murphy's bachelor apartment a few weeks before the film was released also did nothing to enhance his position at the studio.<sup>107</sup>

Astoria finished its one-hundredth short in April 1930. Although this output was well below that at Vitaphone, most of the films were thoughtfully produced and carefully directed at a middlebrow national audience.<sup>108</sup> There were few black acts and only one classical musician, Tito Schipa. Unlike Warners, Paramount did not make many "band shorts" at this time (*All for the Band*, with Eddie Younger and His Mountaineers, is one exception), but the studio did produce some "single acts" featuring Ruth Etting, Rudy Vallee, and Lee Morse. "Single" may refer to more than just the use of one performer: one of the earliest, *Ruth Etting Sings Favorite Melodies* (1929), consists of a single shot. After her first number, Etting clears her throat, looks off-screen, and launches immediately into the next one (although the camera does track in to a medium close-up). Performers like these already had well-established personalities and were better prospects for screen stardom than bandleaders like Red Nichols or Fred Waring.

An abortive attempt to provide filmed prologues for the Publix Theatre chain resulted in a handful of films like *The Ballet Class* (where Agnes de Mille and the Gamby Girls perform routines they had originated at the Roxy) and *The Melting Pot* (directed by Joseph Santley from a prologue originally staged by John Murray Anderson).<sup>109</sup> But such canned entertainment could not compete with films featuring Broadway headliners. The musical performers Paramount did hire were generally more upscale than those at Warners and, with few exceptions, much better known than the performers working for MGM, RKO, and Pathé. Paramount emphasized comedy just as Warners had turned to music (was this a collaborative decision?) and even picked up many of the comedians developed and then dropped by Vitaphone: Fred Allen, Burns and Allen, and Willie and Eugene Howard all moved to Paramount after making their first talkies for Warner Bros.

The very first talkie shot at the studio, *Eddie Cantor, That Party in Person*, not only addressed a potential problem in New York's ethnic comedy tradition, but even tried to defuse it and play it for laughs all at the same time. The comedian is on the phone, negotiating with "Mr. Paramount" about his upcoming talkie debut. "You want me to make this picture in English?" Cantor asks, "Or is it just going to play in New York?" Other studios generally held back from such ethnic shtick, but Paramount appeared to embrace it as part of the cosmopolitan vision its New York studio was intended to represent. Cantor made four shorts there, and his "Moe the Tailor" routine was a highpoint of *Glorifying the American Girl*. Only after he relocated to Hollywood did his comedy routines efface his ethnic origins.<sup>110</sup> When Cantor moved on to features, the studio substituted Joe Smith and Charlie Dale (*Anything But Ham*), Sammy Gordon (*Desperate Sam*), Solly Ward (*The Helping Hand*), George Jessel (*It Might Be Worse*), Willie and Eugene Howard (*Simply Killing*), and various others. Even in a major feature like *Animal Crackers*, shot in July 1930, Groucho Marx could rhyme *schnorrer* with "African explorer" and assume that everyone in the audience would get the joke.<sup>111</sup>

Paramount continued to make features in New York until February 1932, using them to develop such future stars as Ginger Rogers, Miriam Hopkins, and Tallulah Bankhead, as well as writer Preston Sturges and director George Cukor. But despite an occasional critical or financial success, the films no longer represented the cutting edge of Paramount's release schedule. With few exceptions, Paramount's most interesting films were now being made on the West Coast, and the special character of these New York productions—the reason to have reopened the studio in the first place—became harder and harder to identify. Paramount was still floating in cash in 1929; but when hard times struck the industry a year later, Astoria came to be seen as an extravagance the company could no longer afford. The studio needed to justify its existence at every executive board meeting. Ironically, it was the ability to turn out shorts there that kept the feature operation going as long as it did.

An indication of this shift can be seen in Jesse Lasky's announcement in

October 1929 that Paramount aimed to create a “complete production center” in New York, where features, shorts, foreign-language productions, and Publix Theatre stage revues would all be produced. “Our plans call for the creation of a miniature Hollywood in Astoria,” Lasky beamed, but the only name mentioned in press accounts was that of A. J. Balaban, the new head of the shorts department.<sup>112</sup> Balaban, like Cowan (who was promoted to general manager), was a theater man from Paramount’s Chicago wing, which was steadily growing in influence within the corporation.<sup>113</sup>

“The short subject has not only regained its place in the sun but has added no little importance to its social status as a dominant spoke in the wheel of the modern showman’s program, be his house large or small,” wrote trade paper editor Jack Ali-coate in February 1930.<sup>114</sup> Production of shorts in the East was shaken in the wake of the Pathé disaster, but those studios able to meet the tightened fire regulations increased their output of short comedies and musicals. Larry Kent, who quickly succeeded Balaban, divided the program into a set group of comedies, novelties, and “personality sketches,” musical numbers that would be more than just photographs of people singing. “The time has passed when the public is satisfied with a filmed re-hash of an obsolete vaudeville act,” he declared. “Every subject must be up-to-the-minute in its general treatment, unusual in its story, perfectly played and directed and staged with the same attention to beauty and detail as the finest of feature productions.”<sup>115</sup> Examples of this approach can be seen in two shorts featuring Ethel Merman. In *Her Future* (1930) Merman performs a hot version of “Sing, You Sinners” in an expressionistic courtroom setting that seems borrowed from an old Robert Florey picture; in *Old Man Blues* (1932) all the dialogue is sung, and Merman is stalked by a black-cloaked personification of “the blues,” another strategy more closely related to the avant-garde than Tin Pan Alley. To direct these shorts Kent’s staff now included Howard Bretherton, Morton Blumenstock, Ray Cozine, Georgie Hale, Albert Parker (an experienced silent director), and Norman Taurog (who had already made a few feature films, including *Lucky Boy*).<sup>116</sup>

In the summer of 1930, as the industry first began to suffer the effects of the economic depression, both Warners and Paramount announced that they would concentrate their short-film production in the East and use those films as a “clearing house for feature talent.”<sup>117</sup> Larry Kent cranked up production to five a week in order to complete the 1930–1931 complement of shorts before feature activity at the studio increased in the fall.<sup>118</sup> His success rate was rather good: Charlie Ruggles, Ethel Merman, Johnny Weissmuller, Jack Benny, George Burns and Gracie Allen, Jack Haley, and Ginger Rogers all made short films at Astoria that season (although Ginger Rogers, in the two-reel musical *Office Blues*, never dances and spends most of her time behind a desk). Even the directors found these short subjects to be useful stepping-stones: Norman Taurog would win an Academy Award for directing

*Skippy* (1931) almost as soon as Paramount relocated him to its West Coast studio. Working at a remarkable pace, Kent produced eighty one-reelers and twenty two-reelers in 1930.<sup>119</sup>

As theater attendance continued to fall, it became even more clear that short-film production was keeping the doors of the studio open. By 1931 Jesse Lasky could deny rumors of the studio's imminent closure only by pointing to the continued production of shorts.<sup>120</sup> Astoria was still turning out films with Burns and Allen, Ethel Merman, Rudy Vallee, and Smith and Dale, but for the first time it also added a program of slapstick comedies. The presence of Ford Sterling, Al St. John, Karl Dane, and George K. Arthur signaled a shift away from studio-bound dialogue comedy to physical humor often played against outdoor locations, a style far more typical of Hollywood short-comedy production. Kent even expressed the hope that slapstick comedy would be more appealing to the *children* in the audience, a significant change from the studio's earlier promotion of "the cleverest comedians of the Gay White Way."<sup>121</sup> In a desperate move to recapture audience share Paramount was now trying for "the common touch"; but filming obsolete slapstick comedies like *Twenty Horses* and *Summer Daze* in the streets of Astoria was no solution.

Even more objectionable was the studio's belated addition of black acts to its musical program. Although Vitaphone made frequent use of the best Harlem bands and band singers, Paramount largely resisted until 1932. Perhaps inspired by the use its Fleischer cartoon unit had made of Cab Calloway in Betty Boop's *Minnie the Moocher*, the studio cast Louis Armstrong in *Rhapsody in Black and Blue*, the closest thing possible to a live-action cartoon. Clad in a leopard skin, Armstrong stands knee-deep in soap bubbles while singing "Shine" and "I'll Be Glad When You're Dead, You Rascal You." According to the studio, this "colored trumpeter and 'blue' singer . . . is credited with having started the present vogue for weird Negro rhythm and effects."<sup>122</sup> Whatever Armstrong may have started had little relation to the surreal fantasy projected here—but no one at Paramount was prepared to film something like *Yamekraw* or *Black and Tan*.<sup>123</sup> At least *Rhapsody in Black and Blue* had Armstrong's remarkable musical performance to fall back on. *Singapore Sue*, racially insensitive in ways all its own, featured Anna Chang, backed by Pickard's Chinese Syncopators, as the chief attraction of a Southeast Asian dive. The film's comedy climax occurs when Cary Grant, appearing in a bit part as a randy American sailor, is squirted in the face by a trick flower. When the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences prepared a retrospective of film clips as a tribute to Grant in 1970, the only title the actor specifically tried to prohibit was *Singapore Sue*.<sup>124</sup>

Shorts were an integral part of Lasky's "miniature Hollywood in Astoria," one element of a balanced production program attempted in New York by no other studio. But to execute such a program, Paramount needed to duplicate the structure of its West Coast studio. By 1930, 558 people were regularly employed at

Astoria, divided among fifty-three separate studio departments.<sup>125</sup> George Folsey was head of the camera department, not only supervising the work of twenty-one other cameramen, but also personally photographing all the most important features.<sup>126</sup> Joseph Ruttenberg, when not assisting Folsey on features, photographed many of the shorts. Bill Steiner and Larry Williams were assigned the second-tier features; Alfred Gilks, Edward Cronjager, and Karl Freund each shot one film. William Saulter was supervising art director and head of a department of forty; there were also thirty-seven people in the property department and forty-five carpenters employed at all times in the shops.<sup>127</sup> As on the West Coast, where Hans Dreier supervised the work of various unit art directors employed on specific films, Saulter collaborated with Charles Kirk, Ernst Fegté, Sam Corso, and Gabriel Scognamillo (when the studio staff was downsized in September 1931, Saulter was replaced as department head by Kirk).<sup>128</sup> For some reason, Paramount did not credit the designers of its New York films, although cinematographers and even sound recordists were always indicated. This omission may have been a peculiarity of the union contract in the East, but it damaged the reputations of these craftsmen, not only at the time, but also in historical retrospect.<sup>129</sup>

The art department and the camera department obviously had to make special accommodations to sound, but so did every other department, including wardrobe. H.M.K. Smith, who returned as costume director in 1928, discovered he now had a problem with “loud clothes.”<sup>130</sup> He had pulled from the wardrobe department one of Gloria Swanson’s old gowns, which “consisted chiefly of strands and garlands of pearls.” When Western Electric engineers used the gown in a screen test, the sound track resembled the din of “a terrific Indiana hailstorm.” Some of Smith’s favorite fabrics, such as the “glazed tarlatan” used to give an illusion of shimmering fragility in *A Kiss for Cinderella*, were now banned. Lead weights could no longer

Louis Armstrong in costume for *Rhapsody in Black and Blue* (1932). Museum of the Moving Image.





hold trains in place, taffeta must not rustle, and squeaky shoes, of course, were definitely out.

Following the practice of silent days, Smith did not design the stars' wardrobes himself but commissioned gowns from Fifth Avenue shops and couturiers. For *Jealousy*, in which Jeanne Eagels played a Parisian modiste, gowns by Poiret and Paquin were specially imported (while Eagels selected appropriate Parisian scents for each costume change).<sup>131</sup> Because the New York studio had its pick of the world's finest designers, it never developed a strong house style, unlike the situation on the West Coast, where Travis Banton crafted a very identifiable Paramount look. The fashions in these New York pictures may have been more sophisticated, but they lacked the theatricality of the best Hollywood designs and thus, ironically, often seemed rather ordinary by comparison.

A similar problem may have existed in the music department. The practice on the West Coast was to import people like Harry Warren and Al Dubin, who then focused on their screen activities while living and working in Hollywood. In Astoria, music department head Frank Tours supervised a staff that included Jay Gorney, E. Y. "Yip" Harburg, Johnny Green, and Vernon Duke, composers and lyricists who were busily moving back and forth between their chores at Paramount and their (often collaborative) work on various Broadway revues and cabaret acts.<sup>132</sup> Instead of producing a series of original musicals for the screen, like Buddy De Sylva, Lew Brown, and Ray Henderson were doing for Fox on the West Coast, they worked as orchestrators, added occasional songs, spent a lot of time working on shorts, and even wrote scores for a few nonmusical features. "I enjoyed turning out a song with Harburg for a two-reel short in the morning and a few pages of 'emotional' background music for a dramatic feature in the afternoon," Duke remembered.<sup>133</sup>

For *Applause*, a dramatic film whose extremely sophisticated use of music always

William Saulter, supervising art director for Paramount in Astoria (right), with one of his key designers, Ernst Fegté. Museum of the Moving Image.





related to plot and character, Harburg and Gorney wrote “What Wouldn’t I Do for That Man,” a hit that immediately became a Helen Morgan standard. They also wrote two additional numbers for Gertrude Lawrence in Cole Porter’s *The Battle of Paris* and a torch song for Helen Morgan in *Roadhouse Nights*.<sup>134</sup> Johnny Green was a popular local bandleader and solo pianist who accompanied Gertrude Lawrence, Bobbie Arnst, and Ethel Merman on their Astoria musicals (in the days before playback, the accompanists were live, although usually off-screen). His songs, such as “Hello My Lover, Goodbye,” were often featured in the studio’s short musicals.<sup>135</sup> In 1931 he even wrote dramatic scores for two of George Abbott’s films, *Secrets of a Secretary* and *My Sin*.<sup>136</sup> Vernon Duke, a classically trained composer who had studied with Reinhold Glière and worked in Paris for Sergei Diaghilev, began writing show music in New York in 1929 with Harburg and Ira Gershwin. He came to Astoria in April 1930 and worked on such features as *The Night Angel*, *The Sap from Syracuse*, and *Tarnished Lady*. For *Laughter*, in which Fredric March plays a musician, Duke composed a three-minute “rhapsody” and played it himself as March mimed the action onscreen.<sup>137</sup>

Years later, Johnny Green told historian Irene Atkins how he would sit for hours in the Astoria commissary with Harburg and Duke—but they were probably discussing their real work, the numbers they were writing for *George White’s Scandals* or the *Garrick Gaieties*.<sup>138</sup> Film was not a new and challenging medium for these men, just another offshoot of their Broadway careers, like a recording contract. For example, one of the most interesting musical shorts produced by Paramount at this time was *Makers of Melody*, featuring Richard Rodgers and Lorenz Hart. The team had already been signed for features, but instead of discussing their upcoming screen work, they parody their “songwriter” personas in a series of comic blackouts that conjure up earlier hits like “Manhattan” and “The Boy Friend.” The numbers are performed by Ruth Tester, Allan Gould, Inez Courtney, and Kathryn Reese, fixtures in the American musical theater of the 1920s, though their popularity never went beyond Broadway. Despite the apparent movie studio background of this short, it’s as if movie musicals don’t really exist. Indeed, there was probably too much talent in the music department for its own good. Regardless of the opportunities, Paramount never came close to developing an indigenous style of New York movie musical.

One department not duplicated on the West Coast was the special research laboratory under the direction of Lorenzo Del Riccio. Housed just across the street from the main studio building in Astoria, this special facility had been working on a practical wide-screen process ever since Del Riccio first demonstrated Magnascope in 1926. That system merely projected a standard 35mm image onto a gigantic screen; the new process, Magnafilm, employed 56mm film in a special camera and projector. By the summer of 1929, wide-screen/wide-film processes appeared to be

the next new thing in the motion picture industry. With Fox and RKO about to launch rival systems, Paramount gave a demonstration of its Magnafilm on a 40 × 20-foot screen at the Rivoli Theatre on July 18, 1929. The program consisted of a few scenic landscape views and a musical featurette set in a military barracks, *You're in the Army Now*, shot in Astoria with vaudevillian Johnny Burke.<sup>139</sup> But Del Riccio's 56mm film never reached the theaters. That summer Paramount and Warner Bros. were deeply involved in merger negotiations. Although the merger never happened, Paramount scuttled its own wide-film process and agreed to adopt Warners' proposed 65mm standard instead.<sup>140</sup>

Del Riccio was sent back to the lab to redesign his process for 65mm film, which took another year. Meanwhile, industry enthusiasm for wide film all but evaporated. Paramount made one short in Astoria using the Warner standard, a miniature golf musical called *Fair and Square Ways*, which it screened for the Society of Motion Picture Engineers on December 5, 1930.<sup>141</sup> As happened with Spoor's Natural Vision, most audiences probably saw these films only in 35mm, although the *Blue Book of Paramount Shorts* makes it clear that *Fair and Square Ways*, at least, was also distributed in 65mm. Exhibitor resistance to the cost of new wide-film projectors doomed all these early efforts, but Paramount's choice of subjects was so unappealing that one wonders if the studio was ever really serious about developing the format.<sup>142</sup>

Ultimately, it was the existence of a greatly expanded laboratory at Astoria that made the vision of "a miniature Hollywood" seem plausible. By 1930 not only was the lab developing and printing everything shot at the local studio and everything required by the foreign department, but it also handled much of the release printing

Lorenz Hart and Richard Rodgers parody their songwriter personas in the musical short *Makers of Melody* (1929). Museum of the Moving Image.



for the Hollywood studio as well. Six automated Spoor-Thompson developing machines were installed, replacing the manual rack-and-tank facilities of silent days. Fed by forty printers, the Spoor-Thompson machines could generate one million feet of release print every day.<sup>143</sup> Developing and printing had once been considered a distinct art, requiring constant attention and collaboration between the cinematographer and the laboratory supervisor. John Swain, whom George Folsey considered the best film developer he ever knew, was in charge of this lab. Even after the introduction of machine developing of release prints, he still made the first test copy—the answer print—by hand. But by mid-1931 it was decided that even those prints would be produced automatically according to scientifically calculated time and temperature settings. The last answer print to be pulled by hand was for *The Smiling Lieutenant*, and when Folsey sat down with Swain and director Ernst Lubitsch to look at it, Swain leaned over and said, “Take a good look at it, Folsey, because you’ll never see it like this again.” A few weeks later Folsey caught the first run of the film at the Criterion, “and I almost cut my throat because the quality was totally different. It’s not anything like the quality we had on the answer print that John had made.”<sup>144</sup>

Eventually this studio infrastructure supported the production of 231 short films, but few of these titles will ever be encountered in history books.<sup>145</sup> Only the thirty-eight features produced at Astoria between November 1928 and February 1932 qualify, by most definitions, as “real movies.” They are also the only extensive block of sound features made in the East by a major producer during the so-called “classical Hollywood studio era” and so suggest many of the ways in which

Ray Cozine (in director’s chair) and cameraman Larry Williams, behind the slate, pose with the crew during production of the 65mm short *Fair and Square Ways* (1930). Note the two wide-film cameras at left and conventional 35mm Mitchell camera at right. Museum of the Moving Image.



New York filmmaking did or did not resemble the Hollywood model.<sup>146</sup> For a variety of reasons, the ten films supervised by Monta Bell were too eccentric to prove generally successful; on the other hand, those made by Cowan, Fingerlin, and their successors were probably not eccentric enough.

### Features by Formula

Rouben Mamoulian, who worked at Astoria in 1929, later described the studio as “intimate, very personal and *gemütlich* to work in, kind of a cozy place.”<sup>147</sup> The studio he knew seems not so different from the one Louise Brooks worked in a few years earlier, peopled by “writers and directors from Princeton and Yale,” whose creative lives centered somewhere in Manhattan. “Motion pictures did not consume us,” she later told Kenneth Tynan.<sup>148</sup>

Things must have changed by the summer of 1930, when George Cukor arrived to co-direct *The Royal Family of Broadway*.<sup>149</sup> A New York theater director who had recently been working in Hollywood, Cukor was certainly no stranger to the city. But what Mamoulian remembered as cozy, Cukor regarded as cramped: “The building was an unfortunate fucking building, because they seemed to have—as I remember—nothing but staircases and endless staircases leading to nothing, and small stages. It was rather badly built.” In little more than a decade the studio had passed from impressive and monumental, to cozy and intimate, to squalid and institutional. Cukor recalled nothing of Astoria’s vaunted cultural atmosphere; instead, he remembered the stagehands as belligerent, unpleasant, and lacking in intelligence. “Out here they were adorable,” he said of Hollywood technicians. Why? “Most of them had swimming pools, they had two family cars [*sic*] and they were interested in what went on. They were involved. . . . Here [in Los Angeles] people have no other interest except making movies.”<sup>150</sup>

Of course, it is difficult to know if those New York technicians were always unpleasant or only upset at directors like Cukor, whose appearance they probably interpreted as the advance guard of a West Coast takeover and a direct threat to their own jobs. Remember how George Folsey had been greeted the first time he worked in Hollywood. When Dorothy Arzner was sent to Astoria to direct *Colbert* and *March* in *Honor Among Lovers* (1931), she faced the same sort of xenophobic paranoia, as well as a straightforward dose of sexist resentment. “What is this we hear—a broad is gonna direct?” one technician demanded of assistant director Arthur Jacobson. But unlike Cukor, Arzner seems to have won over the locals through sheer determination. “I saw a demonstration of fortitude—guts,” Jacobson remembered. “This gal walked into that studio and in one meeting gained their respect.”<sup>151</sup>

Cukor’s ill-tempered recollections suggest that something had changed after 1930. Before then, filmmakers who had worked on both coasts almost always saw

New York as an ideal and praised its cultural diversity. The Hollywood that Louise Brooks knew in the 1920s had nothing: “no theater, no opera, no concerts—just those god-damned movies.”<sup>152</sup> Suddenly, things were different. Most of the East Coast studios were now clearly obsolete in terms of technology and infrastructure, and even Paramount had turned into an unfortunate factory.<sup>153</sup> It is also likely that the smug New Yorkers, stars and scenery shifters alike, had finally overplayed their hand. “New York actors generally loathe the thought of hustling out to Hollywood in a lower berth,” Frank Condon wrote in 1932, describing the superior airs of New York acting talent:

They have their homes in New York. Their agents live in New York. The plays are in New York, and when they go traipsing off to the Coast they lose touch, abandon their own business, and the managers of the plays think of them as dead. Anyhow, it is too far to California. . . . The average New York actor has heard stories of Hollywood, none of which endears the town to him. He doesn’t like the West. He is a New Yorker, with a New Yorker’s natural dislike for foreign places like Hollywood and Culver City.<sup>154</sup>

In 1930 the local filmmaking community was still displaying its usual air of superiority, even though there was no longer very much to feel superior about. Edward Dmytryk, whom Paramount sent east that year to edit *The Royal Family* for Cukor, had never seen New York before, but he was similarly unimpressed: “The streets were filthy, crosstown traffic was impossible, the theater was largely mediocre, and the residents shockingly rude,” he wrote in his autobiography.<sup>155</sup> Some of this he attributed to the early effects of the depression, but the glory days of film production in the East were clearly over.

The filmmaker-friendly atmosphere in Astoria during Monta Bell’s brief tenure had been replaced by one more to the liking of the “accountants” from Paramount’s theater operation. In the summer of 1929 the studio quickly turned out two films that had been set up by Monta Bell, *The Return of Sherlock Holmes* and *The Laughing Lady*, but which now were not on anyone’s agenda. British director Basil Dean, who had never made a talkie, was allowed to direct the Holmes film on his own but proved to be no Rouben Mamoulian.<sup>156</sup> “We had a lot of trouble during the shooting of the film,” recalled the film’s star, Clive Brook:

The director’s work had hitherto been confined to the theatre, and he had little experience of movies, and how they are made; and he was misguided enough to try to teach the studio personnel their job. He insisted on having four-sided sets constructed, to assist the actors in a feeling of reality, not understanding that cameramen and sound-recordists could not operate in such a



set-up. Finally, he left before the picture was completed and I finished directing the film, myself.<sup>157</sup>

Originally, Lasky had announced that Dean and Brook would film John Galsworthy's *Escape*.<sup>158</sup> Paramount was quite aware of the problems British audiences were having with American accents, and perhaps Lasky felt that a British director and a largely British cast might win them over. But not wishing to take any chances with the domestic market, the studio hedged its bets by shifting to the more commercial Holmes property and casting Monta Bell's wife, Betty Lawford, as Dr. Watson's flapper daughter.<sup>159</sup>

Brook finished with Holmes in September and went right into *The Laughing Lady*, which up to the last minute was being promoted as the third Jeanne Eagels project.<sup>160</sup> But Eagels was suddenly out, and Ruth Chatterton was sent from Hollywood as a replacement. Years earlier *The Laughing Lady* had been a stage vehicle for Ethel Barrymore, and this rather stiff film version was dismissed as dramatically obsolete by most serious critics. Richard Watts Jr. even attacked the good things about the film, including the way "the film insists on breaking into musical accompaniment from time to time, in a rather outmoded way."<sup>161</sup> In fact, the Astoria music department was far ahead of its West Coast rivals in 1929–1930 in the creative use of such non-diegetic underscoring, although critics like Watts may not have appreciated it.

All that summer, film production in New York had been suffering from an Actors Equity job action, the sort of labor dispute that, until then, never seemed to slow down things in Hollywood.<sup>162</sup> But by September the problems with Equity were over, and completion of the new studio annex allowed for eighteen features and twenty-four shorts to be put on the current year's schedule.<sup>163</sup> Lasky and Wanger now had the space, the staff, and the will to put their "miniature Hollywood" into operation, and the results would be a lot more "Hollywood" than anything New York had seen in years. Production of shorts had been cranked up to take advantage of local talent and continue the search for new Paramount stars. Feature production would now do the same. Dusty theatrical adaptations were out, replaced by light comedies with plenty of music—feature-length versions of the same material generated by Larry Kent. Instead of quirky experimentalists like Florey and Mamoulian, unremarkable craftsmen like Hobart Henley, Victor Schertzinger, Fred Newmeyer, Eddie Sutherland, and Norman Taurog would direct most of the features. With Jeanne Eagels gone, Claudette Colbert was now the dramatic star in residence, but what the studio really wanted were bright young things who could sing and dance.

Paramount shipped a few of them out from the West Coast, including Buddy Rogers, Nancy Carroll, and Jack Oakie. Other films were cast with Broadway headliners, established names like Helen Morgan, Ed Wynn, and the Marx Brothers, who never quite fit the Hollywood standard of age and beauty, and whose careers



would be affected accordingly. Then there was that handful of local prospects who seemed to have it all and whom the studio hoped to develop into the next Nancy Carroll—or Claudette Colbert. Helen Kane must have seemed the most promising of these, a cute little boop-oop-a-doop singer with an instantly recognizable vocal style. The studio developed her in shorts, Fleischer Talkartoons, small roles in features (*Nothing But the Truth*), and finally leading roles in *Dangerous Nan McGrew* and *Heads Up*. But Kane proved a one-season wonder, defeated by the limitations of her own style as much as the execrable quality of the features Paramount cast her in.<sup>164</sup> Ethel Merman barely escaped a similar fate. Unlike Helen Kane, she appeared in shorts that had wonderful songs (“Sing You Sinners,” “After I’m Gone”) chosen by Johnny Green to show off her powerful style. Although she was thrown into *Follow the Leader* at the last moment, her trademark rendition of “Satan’s Holiday” did lead to further work in Hollywood, even if the most important part of her career would always be on Broadway.<sup>165</sup>

On the other hand, Paramount found someone better than Nancy Carroll when it signed Miriam Hopkins. Moonlighting from her role in the hit Gilbert Seldes revival of *Lysistrata*, Hopkins gave so much energy to *Fast and Loose* (with a script by another Broadway favorite, Preston Sturges), that she was immediately signed to a long-term contract.<sup>166</sup> Hopkins insisted on filming in New York to allow her to continue her stage career (her next film was *The Smiling Lieutenant*), but when the studio closed, she continued with Paramount on the West Coast in films like *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* and *Trouble in Paradise*.

Unfortunately, the greatest star developed by the talent agency in Astoria was not one whom Paramount had the wit to retain. “An interesting sidelight on the lengths to which studios will go in a search for talent is that Paramount makes about 18 tests a week, at the cost of \$1000 a day and that, in several months, the only player for which it has contracted as a result of these tests is Ginger Rogers,” revealed the *Motion Picture Herald*. “One Ginger, they say, is worth 100 tests.”<sup>167</sup> Rogers may have done tests, but she had also appeared locally in shorts for RKO, Columbia, and Pathé, and these clearly demonstrated a screen presence more marketable than either Helen Kane or Ethel Merman. At first, Paramount gave her the full star treatment, not just featuring her in a short, *Office Blues*, but allowing her to steal an important dramatic feature, *Young Man of Manhattan*. Playing an especially blasé example of flaming youth, Rogers turned “Cigarette me, big boy” into a national catch phrase. But in *Queen High*, *The Sap from Syracuse*, and *Follow the Leader* she was reduced to conventional ingénue roles, and she almost disappeared in Dorothy Arzner’s *Honor Among Lovers*. Apart from giving her an occasional song to sing, Paramount had no idea what to do with her; still looking for the next Nancy Carroll, the studio dropped its option even before Rogers left New York.

Astoria’s batting average in 1930 was really no worse than Schulberg’s output on the West Coast, but it was still far from perfect. After all, as Groucho Marx would

quip in *Animal Crackers*, “All the jokes can’t be good.” *Animal Crackers* itself, shot in April 1930, was more smoothly played than the Marx Brothers film Robert Florey had made more than a year before. But the action took place on a single, unitary set (the Rittenhouse home, “showplace of Long Island,” designed in appropriately vulgar art deco fashion by William Sauter and Ernst Fegté), and the camera observed most of it from the safety of a soundproof booth. At times the telephoto lenses required to keep actors within the frame had even more trouble than they had on *The Cocoanuts*. The real surprise, however, is the miserable quality of the sound recording.

Familiarity with recording practice had brought a degree of contempt. After Walter Wanger rid the studio of those annoying experts from Western Electric, microphone placement became much more casual, and many subsequent Astoria productions, including *Animal Crackers*, were quite poorly recorded. “We used to use many microphones on a set and keep them as close to the speakers as possible,” admitted Edwin G. Stewart, head of the sound department in 1929. “Today, in the average set, there is usually only one microphone and it is suspended rather high above the heads of the players.”<sup>168</sup> The earlier technique had been very hard on actors, directors, and cameramen. If actors were to move around the set, they needed to address different microphones hidden in various spots. On *Gentlemen of the Press*, filmed in January 1929, Walter Huston

had to be mindful always of four microphones and three cameras and the brightness and shadow of a battery of lights. He had to talk over the telephone and, at the same time, direct a dozen persons in the [newspaper] office. He had

Monta Bell, director of *Young Man of Manhattan* (1930), with Astoria’s most underutilized discovery, Ginger Rogers. Museum of the Moving Image.



to sit and stand up, walk to the door and back to the desk, taking, all together, eleven positions always followed by the camera. Huston had to be careful also of the tilt of his face, in order that his voice might be sent more effectively to the microphone. . . . All this took place in 23 [*sic*] feet of film, less than three minutes of showing time.<sup>169</sup>

For the more frequent scenes where actors and camera both remained in one place, the microphone would be hidden in the nearest available spot (although Edward G. Robinson may have been joking when he recalled that on *The Hole in the Wall* the hiding place sometimes included “Miss Colbert’s décolletage”).<sup>170</sup> On *Queen High* the mike was inserted in a hole cut through a restaurant table, then hidden behind a sugar bowl; for a scene where two mikes were needed, one went into a wastebasket, the other into an inkwell.<sup>171</sup> The Western Electric I-B microphone used on those early films produced such a weak signal that it needed to contain its own preamplifier, creating a fifteen-pound cylinder referred to by technicians as a “cannon.” The relative immobility of the I-B was tough on actors, but it did produce a very clean track. Later technical “improvements” allowed a scene to be recorded by a single microphone placed “rather high above the heads of the players,” but this technique created the distant, hollow effect heard in *Animal Crackers* and the Ethel Merman short *Be Like Me*. The trailer for *Animal Crackers* asked audiences to “come

A typical early talkie production set-up, from *Gentlemen of the Press* (1929). Millard Webb (seated) directs Walter Huston and Betty Lawford, while cinematographer George Folsey and camera operator Sam Leavitt huddle in the camera booth. A single Western Electric I-B microphone hangs from the ceiling. Arc lamps, whose sputtering might mar the sound track, have been replaced by softer incandescent lights. Museum of the Moving Image.



three times and try to catch all the laughs.” How much of the audience’s difficulty was due to the rapid-fire pacing of the gags and how much to the quality of the sound recording is still hard to say.

Sound was being treated not as an artistic challenge but as one more commercial hurdle to be efficiently managed. In the spring of 1930 two more recording channels were added at Astoria, bringing the total to six (Paramount then had twelve at its West Coast studios).<sup>172</sup> The greatest hurdle of all, of course, was that of the foreign market, and Jesse Lasky decided to conquer it by creating a multi-lingual production center in Astoria. A few foreign-language films had been produced in the East, and some experimentation with multiple-language production had taken place in Hollywood. But Lasky’s decision to film an important feature like *The Big Pond* twice, using the same sets and many of the same actors, was still a remarkable gamble. Maurice Chevalier had moved on to Hollywood after shooting the brief *Bon Jour, New York* for Robert Florey. After making two features there, he returned to Astoria in December 1929 and began filming two versions of his next picture—once as *The Big Pond*, then, as each scene was completed, once again as *La grande mare*. Chevalier, Claudette Colbert, Andrée Corday, and Nat Pendleton appeared in both versions. Hobart Henley directed, assisted by stage director Bertram Harrison for the English version and Jacques Bataille-Henri for the French.<sup>173</sup> Working straight through the holiday season, Henley finished both versions in only five weeks. Delighted, Jesse Lasky announced that a group of French, German, Spanish, and Italian actors would be gathered in Astoria to permit the filming of talkies in various languages, thus solving “his little problem of meeting the foreign market on sound terms.”<sup>174</sup>

For various reasons, Paramount ultimately created its multiple-language studio outside of Paris, under the direction of the peripatetic Robert Kane. The only subsequent bilingual feature at Astoria was *The Smiling Lieutenant*, another Chevalier-Colbert collaboration, shot a year later by Ernst Lubitsch.<sup>175</sup> Instead, the studio concentrated on “doubling in wax,” taking an existing film and recording new vocal tracks with local foreign-speaking talent to service Paramount’s overseas markets. By April 1930, twenty-two features and thirty-three shorts had been “doubled” in this fashion.<sup>176</sup>

In any language, *The Big Pond* was Astoria’s biggest hit of the season. Chevalier was nominated for the Academy Award, several of the songs became standards (including “You Brought a New Kind of Love to Me”), and Preston Sturges’s few days’ work polishing the dialogue helped establish his screenwriting credentials.<sup>177</sup> Chevalier plays an impoverished European aristocrat looking to marry Claudette Colbert and forced to prove his mettle by working his way up through her father’s chewing gum factory (“Don’t bite the gum that feeds you,” the script advises). The art department found a reasonable local substitute for Venice on the south shore of

Long Island, and there was considerable location shooting at the American Chiclé factory on Northern Boulevard, just a few blocks from the studio.<sup>178</sup>

*The Big Pond* and *Animal Crackers* were rare successes on the studio's 1929–1930 program. Without a firm hand at the wheel, it was clear that Astoria would produce nothing but knockoffs and imitations of Paramount's West Coast product. And as 1930 wore on, audiences began to dwindle, even for the best films. That summer some Paramount theaters never bothered to open; others were being converted into miniature golf courses.<sup>179</sup> Struggles continued inside the Paramount hierarchy, and rumors began to spread that heads were about to roll. This was the atmosphere at Astoria when George Cukor and Cyril Gardner arrived to direct the film version of George S. Kaufman and Edna Ferber's *The Royal Family*, clarified for movie audiences as *The Royal Family of Broadway*. If Cukor remembered the grips and electricians as being in a bad mood, they had good reason. Life at the studio was in turmoil, simultaneously gearing up for increased production and slimming down for improved efficiency.

Because the downturn in business was seen as temporary, plans continued for expansion of the Astoria studio. A one-story brick-and-steel building was built on a newly acquired plot across from the main studio between Seventh and Eighth Avenues. New stages were planned there, but never built.<sup>180</sup> Where personnel had previously been identified as either East Coast or West Coast employees, now writers, producers, directors, and stars were shipped back and forth across the country in a frenzy. Herman J. Mankiewicz arrived in July to work on *Laughter* and *The Royal Family of Broadway*, but also to scour New York for dialogue writers to bring back to Hollywood.<sup>181</sup>

Claudette Colbert and Maurice Chevalier in *The Big Pond* (1930). Using a different supporting cast and dialogue director, Paramount simultaneously produced a French-language version, *La grande mare*. But Jesse Lasky's plan to turn Astoria into a center of foreign-language production never materialized. Museum of the Moving Image.





## End of an Era

On August 29, 1930, it was announced that Ernst Lubitsch had been appointed “supervising director” of Paramount’s East Coast studio and that Hector Turnbull, formerly B. P. Schulberg’s associate producer in Hollywood, would occupy a similar position in New York. Schulberg himself had recently been named Paramount’s “managing director of production” and had taken the opportunity to put in his own man in New York. Walter Wanger lost status in the reshuffle.<sup>182</sup> Within six weeks Schulberg, Wanger, Lubitsch, and Sam Jaffe (production manager of the Hollywood studio) met in New York to bring order. *The Royal Family of Broadway* had just finished shooting; but instead of looking at that film, the executives were immediately taken to a screening of *Laughter*, a far more significant example of East Coast production.<sup>183</sup>

*Laughter* was an original screenplay by Harry D’Arrast, Douglas Doty, and Donald Ogden Stewart, an ambivalent inquiry into the empty, if glamorous, existence of New York’s capitalist elite. The melodramatic entanglements of New York’s brokers and bankers would soon become a mainstay of Astoria production, but *Laughter* (whose script received an Oscar nomination that year) managed to touch some of the same chords struck by Philip Barry in *Holiday* and *The Philadelphia Story*. This was no coincidence: Donald Ogden Stewart (who had been filming comic monologues at the studio) had appeared in the original stage production of *Holiday*. (A decade later he would write the screenplay for *The Philadelphia Story*.) Harry D’Arrast, who also directed the picture, was another member of the Chaplin circle brought to Astoria by Monta Bell. The director of such late silent gems as *Service for Ladies* and *Dry Martini*, he was probably the greatest exponent of “the Lubitsch touch” after Lubitsch himself. What the real Lubitsch thought of this fine film is not recorded, but D’Arrast never made the subsequent picture in Astoria for which he had already been announced; indeed, he made only one more film in America.<sup>184</sup>

After being kicked upstairs, Monta Bell continued at Astoria as a producer and occasional director. His *Young Man of Manhattan* was ambitious enough but could never overcome the melodrama inherent in its source novel (Claudette Colbert goes blind after drinking bad liquor foisted on her by her good-for-nothing husband, played by Colbert’s current husband, Norman Foster). *Laughter* was probably set up by Bell, but Herman J. Mankiewicz appears to have taken it over after Bell collapsed with a “nervous breakdown” and was shipped off to Honolulu.<sup>185</sup> Although it echoes *Holiday*’s call to subordinate wealth and luxury to the pursuit of emotional self-fulfillment, *Laughter* is far darker than anything in Philip Barry’s world. The suicide of tin-pot bohemian Glenn Anders is truly creepy and gives the film a quality no Nancy Carroll picture ever had before.<sup>186</sup> Indeed, Nancy Carroll herself had been shipped from the West Coast specifically to play in this film, and it marked a decided change in tone from the light romantic comedies that had made her the first



new star of the talkies. Her role may have been the sort of artistic stretch so many actors sought in New York, but the film as a whole failed to deliver for Nancy Carroll fans. A few years later, comparing its vision of an unsatisfied heiress with that of the current hit, *It Happened One Night*, Mankiewicz confessed that “*Laughter* was a flop. . . . In our story Nancy was married to a guy who earns eighty-four million dollars every afternoon. She lives in a sixty-room quadruplex on Park Avenue. Her arms are dead tired from carrying so much rare jewelry. . . . [And] we started off with the assumption that this was no good, because—she didn’t have Laughter!”<sup>187</sup> Mankiewicz understood that this was not the sort of mistake that would have been made at the Hollywood studio.

Soon after Paramount announced that Lubitsch would be coming to Astoria, *Film Daily* cited with approval one pundit’s belief that 50 percent of American film production would be in New York within two years.<sup>188</sup> At the time, no one could have predicted the severity of the economic depression or the extent of its impact on the motion picture industry. But industry watchers should have understood the short-term effect of falling attendance on studio output and the consequences of the power struggle inside Paramount. Soon after “the inauguration of the B. P. Schulberg regime,” Paramount cut fifty people from the sound, art, and script departments at Astoria and shut down production for two weeks as soon as Cukor finished *The Royal Family of Broadway*.<sup>189</sup> Walter Wanger, whose authority as “chief studio executive” was now limited to New York, looked for ways to turn the studio around and salvage his own position in the corporation.

Despite the cuts in staffing, production at Astoria was intended to continue at high levels and even increase.<sup>190</sup> Musicals had dominated the studio calendar the previous year, but the only one now on the schedule was the one Lubitsch would direct. With the exception of a minor Charlie Ruggles comedy, *The Girl Habit*, largely shot on location in New Hyde Park, every other feature that season belonged to the inexpensive “woman’s picture” genre.<sup>191</sup>

Paramount had always depended on female stars, something that was especially evident at Astoria. If action pictures were to be made, George Bancroft or Gary Cooper would make them in Hollywood. Paramount did assign Fredric March to New York between July 1930 and July 1931, when he appeared in five films, but only as a foil for one of the studio’s resident actresses. Although a starring vehicle was being developed for him in Astoria, production of *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* was eventually relocated to the West Coast.<sup>192</sup> Of the last fourteen features Paramount would produce at Astoria, Claudette Colbert would star in six, Nancy Carroll in four, and Tallulah Bankhead in three.

Tallulah Bankhead, who had appeared in a handful of East Coast films in 1918 and 1919, had been working on the London stage since 1923. Although studio publicity promoted the exotic new import as “a combination of Jeanne Eagels and Marlene Dietrich” and gave considerable attention to her wardrobe and accessories,



Jack Shallitt, chief portrait photographer at the Paramount East Coast studio, took this photograph of Fredric March in his preliminary "Mr. Hyde" makeup early in 1931. Production of *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* was subsequently shifted to the West Coast. This makeup, based on that used in John Barrymore's 1920 film (see page 27), is quite different from the "Neanderthal" look designed by Wally Westmore for the finished film. Museum of the Moving Image.

Paramount failed completely in its efforts to establish Bankhead as a movie star.<sup>193</sup> For her first film, *Tarnished Lady*, the studio gave her to George Cukor. "Cukor had never directed a picture [on his own]," Bankhead remembered. "Here was I, a stage actress with a stage director, stage writers . . . on my first film. I mean, we were swimming without water wings and we had never been in the water before."<sup>194</sup> For his part, Cukor found most of the problem to be with Bankhead. "She went to England, and then came back and wanted to be a movie actress. But I don't think she was fitted to be that," he told Joe Adamson. "I didn't think she was good in the picture. She got better in other pictures, the ones with Lubitsch and the others, but she wasn't ready. And she was wanting to be a movie queen, you see." Cukor also dismissed Donald Ogden Stewart's original screenplay, called "New York Lady," as a "silly goddamned story."<sup>195</sup> According to the *New York Times*, the opening-day audience frequently laughed at the film because of startling shifts in tone or location.<sup>196</sup>

In addition to these problems, Wanger assigned the photography of the picture to Larry Williams, a silent-era cameraman without George Folsey's experience in lighting glamorous actresses—or dealing with the problems of microphone shadow. Years earlier Williams had helped the young Folsey get started in the business, but now Wanger ordered Folsey to "straighten him out" because Bankhead's face was invisible against an overlit background. To eliminate the shadow of the microphone

on a back wall, Williams and his gaffer (chief electrician) had set up four key lights to burn it out. "So you have a white, white, white thing, with a slightly less white thing in front—it's going to be dark," Folsey explained. "And plus the fact that she had all this mud and junk on her [face] anyway."<sup>197</sup> Folsey found that Williams and his electrician simply did not understand the photographic principles behind this problem.<sup>198</sup> When the film finally appeared, faint praise for Bankhead's performance was lost amid complaints about the script and the "bad lighting and poor photography."<sup>199</sup>

Bankhead's subsequent Astoria films were directed by the more experienced George Abbott and photographed by George Folsey, but they still suffered from third-rate scripts. In *My Sin* she starts off as a notorious cabaret singer in the Panama Canal Zone, then transforms herself into a successful New York interior decorator. "Tallulah's flamboyance and theatricality charmed the sophisticated world," Abbott remembered, "but the bobbysoxers and housewives and folks out in the Middle West never bought it."<sup>200</sup> In *The Cheat*, the third version of a film Lasky originally produced in 1915, she was a foolish Long Island socialite involved with a sadistic orientalist.<sup>201</sup> The dramatic highlight of *The Cheat* is the scene in which this villain (played by Irving Pichel) burns his mark onto her breast with a red-hot branding iron. In order to produce the desired effect, the director called for Pichel to use the branding iron on a slab of hamburger located near the correct spot on Bankhead's anatomy, thus generating the proper amount of smoke and sizzle for the cameras. But in take after take, either Bankhead or Pichel failed to struggle adequately. "We did it again and we did it again," Folsey remembered. "Now each time . . . this iron is thinning out the hamburger more and more. So about the fourth take . . . he does it again and this time Tallulah really feels the heat and she says, 'Oh, my God!' and she's out of his arms and across the stage."<sup>202</sup> It would be Bankhead's last film in Astoria. Although Paramount failed to give her any better material on the West Coast, at least Hollywood knew the proper way to treat a star.

Publicist and film historian John Springer once described Nancy Carroll as "the first girl to reach stardom in the talkies."<sup>203</sup> A daughter of Tenth Avenue who was cast by author Anne Nichols herself in the screen version of *Abie's Irish Rose*, Carroll sang and danced through a rapid series of hits for Paramount, including *The Shopworn Angel*, *The Dance of Life*, and *Sweetie*. In a role said to have been intended for Jeanne Eagels, she was then cast against type as a hard-bitten "manicurist" in Edmund Goulding's *The Devil's Holiday*, for which she was nominated for an Academy Award. Now one of Paramount's hottest properties, Carroll was sent to New York in the summer of 1930, where Wanger continued the project of reshaping her flapper image for the new decade.

Their first attempt, *Laughter*, was a *succes d'estime* that repeated the fine notices of *Devil's Holiday*. But as Herman Mankiewicz suggested, Carroll's fans did not respond to her as the wealthy, disaffected spouse of Frank Morgan who runs off to

Paris with musician Fredric March when he tells her “you need laughter to make you clean.” In *Stolen Heaven* Carroll played a prostitute who teams with a burglar (Phillips Holmes, her co-star in *Devil’s Holiday*) in a scheme to live it up in Palm Beach on the proceeds of a factory robbery, then commit suicide. An exceptionally bleak variant on the “fallen woman” genre, *Stolen Heaven* prefigures the dark film noir of the 1940s, at least until the pair decide to “go straight” in the final reels.

Wanger then turned Carroll over to Edmund Goulding, who had written a curious Central European pastiche called *The Night Angel*. Apparently intended for Marlene Dietrich, the film was shot in Astoria, with the very un-European Nancy Carroll, to take advantage of the lavish Viennese settings Lubitsch was building for *The Smiling Lieutenant*. Instead of a plot, the film is structured around a series of episodes establishing the relationship of Carroll and Fredric March. Goulding fancied himself a composer (he worked with Vernon Duke on the score) and a visual master who could reinvent the fluid style of silent picture days. The *New York Times* did mention Sergei Eisenstein in its review of *The Night Angel*, but the film is most interesting for the elaborate moving camera shots achieved by cinematographer Bill Steiner.<sup>204</sup> The studio had introduced portable “blimped” cameras in March 1930 and had abandoned soundproof booths entirely by October, so the crews were now well experienced in such techniques.<sup>205</sup> Unfortunately, there was nothing much to photograph in *The Night Angel*, other than the elaborate settings (redressed as Prague) and the occasional surprise appearance of such New York landmarks as the grand staircase to the Bethesda Fountain in Central Park.

If historians might see *The Night Angel* as an interesting stylistic experiment, it seems to have been a career-killing disaster in 1931. Coupled with some personal problems and a pair of lackluster melodramas, *Personal Maid* and *Wayward*, Carroll’s stint in Astoria “finished off what was left of her popularity.”<sup>206</sup> She returned to the West Coast in 1932, where Paramount quietly ran out the rest of her contract. Perhaps her moment of stardom was fated to end when it did, and nothing that Walter Wanger and his staff might have done could have prevented it. But the fact that Nancy Carroll and Tallulah Bankhead both did so badly in New York, while Dietrich, Sylvia Sydney, and Carole Lombard continued to develop well on the West Coast, did nothing for Wanger’s standing in his battle with B. P. Schulberg.<sup>207</sup> If not for Miriam Hopkins and Claudette Colbert, there would have been little reason at all to keep making features in New York, so when Lubitsch arrived there for the next Chevalier picture, he made sure to use both of them.

Although he worked in New York from October 1930 through April 1931 and enjoyed the title of “supervising director,” Lubitsch seems to have had very little involvement in anything at Astoria beyond the production of *The Smiling Lieutenant*.<sup>208</sup> Did Paramount see Lubitsch as another, better Monta Bell, someone to be godfather to the studio’s entire program, personally supervising the most important films and directing a few pictures himself? If so, Lubitsch saw his job

description differently. When prodded by Irene Atkins regarding Lubitsch's tenure at the studio, camera department head George Folsey stated flatly, "Ernst Lubitsch was there to direct one picture, *The Smiling Lieutenant*. That's all he did."<sup>209</sup>

Lubitsch had already completed a script for *The Man I Killed*, a gloomy antiwar story that would have brought Emil Jannings back from Berlin.<sup>210</sup> He had also set Preston Sturges to work on something original for Maurice Chevalier.<sup>211</sup> But as negotiations with Jannings dragged on and nothing came of the Sturges script, Lubitsch and his writing staff cobbled together an adaptation of an old Viennese operetta that had already been made as a silent film, *The Waltz Dream*. Oscar Straus himself came from Vienna to work on the score.<sup>212</sup> The decision to make *The Smiling Lieutenant* as a full-scale musical was a considerable gamble on Lubitsch's part. With the vogue for the genre having passed, other studios were canceling upcoming musical projects and filming Broadway shows without their songs so they could be advertised as "not a musical." In extreme instances, studios even shelved completed feature pictures (as MGM did with *The March of Time*). One chronicle of the genre lists sixty-seven musicals released in 1930 and only seventeen in 1931.<sup>213</sup>

Chevalier would play a charming Austrian officer with a roving eye, currently enamored of Claudette Colbert, leading lady of an all-girl café orchestra known as "The Viennese Swallows." Complications arise when he is forced to marry the sheltered daughter of a visiting monarch; Colbert saves the situation by teaching the princess to "jazz up your lingerie." Casting Miriam Hopkins as the "good girl" still seems a strange decision to some critics, but Lubitsch was fascinated by blondes and did whatever was necessary for Hopkins to wind up with Chevalier at the end of the film.<sup>214</sup> Later in Hollywood she would star in two more of his greatest films, *Trouble in Paradise* and *Design for Living*.

*The Smiling Lieutenant* looks nothing like the other films shot in New York by Paramount. Lubitsch used the local technical crews—Folsey and Ruttenberg behind the cameras, and Ernest Zatorsky as chief monitor man—but he assigned his Hollywood set designer, Hans Dreier, to collaborate with Ernst Fegté on the film's playfully baroque interiors, a unique example in this period of a West Coast art director contributing to a New York film.<sup>215</sup> Like Lubitsch, both Dreier and Fegté had worked in the German studios in the early 1920s. Their collaboration here was so successful that all three worked together again in Hollywood on *Design for Living*. Indeed, Fegté would later become one of the few New York technicians to emigrate successfully to Hollywood. *The Smiling Lieutenant* was nominated for the Academy Award as best picture of 1931–1932, the only East Coast production to win such an accolade until *On the Waterfront*. But by the time the awards were announced, not only was Lubitsch back in Hollywood, so were most of Astoria's key production personnel.<sup>216</sup>

*The Smiling Lieutenant* opened at the Criterion on May 22, 1931, and the reviews were uniformly positive. Critics compared it with landmarks like René Clair's *Le million*. "I do not hesitate an instant to call it Lubitsch's best talking film," wrote

John S. Cohen in the *New York Sun*.<sup>217</sup> But that same day the trade press carried the announcement of Paramount's proposed salary cut of as much as 30 percent, a bombshell that "aroused considerable excitement in the Astoria studio." Paramount was hemorrhaging cash, and rumor had it that the New York studio would be closed immediately. "It's the bunk," was all a corporate spokesman would say, while simultaneously announcing Lubitsch's withdrawal to the West Coast, taking *The Man I Killed* with him.<sup>218</sup> Within days studio manager John Fingerlin and 150 others were fired. When the fence enclosing the back lot was painted with the name of a fictitious lumber company for production of a short, rumors shot through Times Square that the studio had already been sold.<sup>219</sup>

The *Motion Picture Daily* understood that the issue was not just falling box office receipts: "Victory in the ancient rivalry between B. P. Schulberg and Walter Wanger at Paramount appears again to have gone to the former. . . . Persistent is the story that Wanger is out. . . . Times Square reports had it that the Long Island plant would close at once if Tallulah Bankhead could be persuaded to finish the remainder of her contract in Hollywood."<sup>220</sup> One clue to this outcome should have been evident a month earlier, when Lasky loudly proclaimed Walter Wanger Paramount's "Eastern Studio Genius," the same kiss of death he had bestowed on William Le Baron in 1927.<sup>221</sup> Word around town had it that July 13, the scheduled close of shooting for Tallulah Bankhead's *My Sin*, would be the studio's last day.<sup>222</sup> But the studio did not close. Indeed, that summer Schulberg sent Gary Cooper east to star opposite Claudette Colbert in *His Woman*. "Why not?" quipped a Paramount spokesman. "We never said it was going to close, did we?"<sup>223</sup>

Throughout the fall and into the winter rumors flew in all directions: reports had the studio closing or not closing, continuing with features or moving to an all-shorts policy, or even cranking up production to record levels. But the staff knew better and began to desert the ship before it sank beneath them. Larry Williams left for Hollywood; William Saulter quit to look for freelance work; Larry Kent had a nervous breakdown.<sup>224</sup> Officially, things were still operating as they always had. In August and September 1931 Tallulah Bankhead worked on *The Cheat*. The usual publicity went out regarding the use of locations at the Sands Point Bath Club and the Vernon Mann estate in Great Neck. Ruth St. Denis had been hired to stage the film's "Cambodian dance number."<sup>225</sup> Nancy Carroll shot *Wayward* in November, and Claudette Colbert was quickly pushed into two features. The first, *The Wiser Sex*, was directed by Berthold Viertel, one of the leading lights of Hollywood's German colony. Because Viertel's command of English was weak at best, he had brought along his personal assistant, Fred Zinnemann. In his autobiography, the future director of *High Noon* and *From Here to Eternity* had nice things to say about Folsey, Ruttenberg, and the rest of the technical staff—but "I can't remember much about the film except that I disliked the rushes and wished I could quit."<sup>226</sup> In January, Colbert and Edmund Lowe began *The Misleading Lady*, a rather promising proto-



screwball comedy featuring an heiress, a lot of silliness regarding marriage, and an autogiro (filmed at Floyd Bennett Field). By March 1 the picture was finished—and so was the studio. The balance of Astoria's unmade product was abruptly shifted to Hollywood.<sup>227</sup> This time the corpse stayed dead.

As February turned into March, the various offices scattered around the building closed, one by one. The shorts department turned out its final two-reelers: Rudy Vallee in *Musical Doctor*, Burns and Allen in *Hot Dogs*, Tom Howard's *The Rookie*, and *Rhapsody in Black and Blue* with Louis Armstrong.<sup>228</sup> Colbert and Lowe went through the final scenes of *The Misleading Lady*. And on one of the upstairs stages, Ernst Lubitsch was filming retakes for *One Hour with You*.<sup>229</sup> Lubitsch had produced this film in Hollywood, with George Cukor directing, but gradually took over the picture himself when he realized that Cukor's direction lacked "the Continental flavor." Cukor was suing Paramount over the screen credit.<sup>230</sup> Now, just a few weeks before the opening, Lubitsch was in Astoria with Chevalier and Jeannette MacDonald, reshooting the ending.

Joseph Ruttenberg was working on the Colbert picture and probably wondering where his next job was coming from. He had been at the studio ever since it reopened and remembered it in its best days, with all the stages active and the red carpet rolled out whenever Adolph Zukor came over from the Paramount Building. Zukor never

In February 1932, just before Paramount abandoned its studio in Astoria, a wistful Adolph Zukor posed for one last photograph with Ernst Lubitsch. The director had come to New York for last-minute retakes on his West Coast production *One Hour with You*. Museum of the Moving Image.



spent much time at the Hollywood studio; for him, Astoria was the Paramount studio, and he had struggled to keep it open for a very long time. But now, both he and Jesse Lasky were themselves losing power in the corporation. It would not be long before they, like the studio, would become part of Paramount's history. "One day I was standing in the middle of the studio near a door and I see a little short . . . a little bit of a man standing in the doorway," Ruttenberg remembered:

I look around and I [do] a double take and I realize that it was Mr. Zukor. Now nobody came to see him. Nobody came to receive him or anything. So I sit there and I said to myself, "My God, that's Mr. Zukor." So I went over to the door and I said, "Could I help you?" He said, "Where is Mr. Lubitsch please? Where is Mr. Lubitsch?" And Mr. Lubitsch had come from California to do some extra scenes, so he was up on the upper stage. And I escorted Mr. Zukor up the freight elevator. . . . It's the saddest thing I've ever experienced.<sup>231</sup>

A few weeks later Paramount announced to the press that the Astoria studio was available to any producer with an interest in buying or leasing the property.<sup>232</sup>

It was only at this moment that East Coast production ceased to be a factor in what later historians would refer to as "the classical Hollywood studio system." Never again would a vertically integrated corporation, employing a permanent staff of artists, technicians, and executives, produce in its own studios a full program of shorts and features anywhere but Hollywood. Yet even this blow did not mean the end of the motion picture industry in the East. The Hollywood studio system itself would be dead in less than twenty years. The economic model that replaced it would separate production from exhibition and abandon the block booking of program releases in favor of an emphasis on individual titles. Exclusive contracts would be eliminated, with personnel moving freely from one project and producer to another. The term "studio" itself, which had once described a system of production so pervasive that it was often used as shorthand for an entire way of life, would once again refer only to a piece of land, or even a single building. Eventually, this decentralized structure would prove more successful, financially, than the one it replaced. And like its predecessor, this new model was developed and perfected in the East.

"I didn't enjoy closing the New York facilities, because that was my home," Adolph Zukor remembered in 1953. "I started in New York, and I ran the studio and talked to the directors and I lived it and lived with the people. Of course, when we gave up the studio and moved out to Hollywood, I missed it. I still miss it."<sup>233</sup>

RKO abandoned the Gramercy studio after the Pathé fire and relocated most of its East Coast production to the Ideal studio in Hudson Heights, New Jersey. In 1930 W. C. Fields made his first talking film here, *The Golf Specialist*. Fort Lee Historical Society.



# 7

## Talkies for Everyone

### Sound Stages for Rent

By the end of World War I, Hollywood was firmly established as the center of American film production. It refined the industrial model created in New York and New Jersey and perfected the efficient “Hollywood studio system” that would dominate the business for decades. Studios did survive in the East, but the local “system” was already growing more diffuse. Some studios were still massive lots owned and operated by vertically integrated majors like Paramount and First National. A few powerful individuals, including D. W. Griffith and the Talmadge sisters, operated private studios dedicated to their films alone. And rental stages like Tec-Art gathered in whatever business remained.

All this changed dramatically in the 1930s. Individual filmmakers had long since abandoned the romantic notion of maintaining a studio lot as their own private atelier. Warners would continue to operate in Brooklyn through 1939, if only for the increasingly marginal production of short films. Paramount’s connection with the Astoria stages would be even more tentative. What did survive, and flourish, was the Tec-Art model, where stage space could be rented by the day (or even by the hour) to production companies whose business horizon seldom extended beyond the film at hand.

Because the distribution mechanism was so heavily weighted against independent production, most independents still working in the East operated on the margins of the industry. Without established stars or guaranteed distribution outlets, they could not attract the financing required to match the glamour and gloss of

Hollywood studio product, a situation that would not change until after World War II. Their isolation was so great that otherwise obscure niche markets, such as racial and ethnic production, now became a significant factor in the local film industry. In September 1929 alone, between thirty and forty new motion picture companies were formed in New York State, a significant increase over previous months.<sup>1</sup>

On the other hand, the character of this activity bore very little relation to the way things were being done in Hollywood. On the West Coast, “poverty row” producers had re-created the studio system on the cheap, generating a constant stream of low-budget Westerns and serials.<sup>2</sup> Nothing like this happened in the East. Although many short comedies and musicals were filmed there, no talking serials were ever produced, and no B-movie series production was even attempted. Lacking the economic cushion provided by this sort of mass production, local producers (and production facilities) were forced to redefine their business without regard to categorization, indiscriminately manufacturing anything from feature pictures to industrial films.

This sort of economically marginal activity should have collapsed immediately when the industry contracted during the depression, dragged down by the inefficiencies inherent in its lack of specialization. Instead, it managed to survive—just barely—and hang on until the film business changed again after the war. By a stroke of luck, the coming of sound had already established the necessary infrastructure in the East just before the extent of the economic collapse became apparent. Although the expected volume of business never materialized, the laboratories, soundstages, and equipment houses that would support production in the East for the next forty years were already in place.

Some of these stages were converted from earlier silent studios, but many others opened up in unexpected locations. In Camden, New Jersey, the Victor Recording Studios at 114 North 5th Street (previously the Trinity Baptist Church) were pressed into service to provide a synchronized musical score and appropriate sound effects for First National’s silent feature *Lilac Time* (1928). Nat Shilkret conducted a symphony orchestra, and Raymond and Charles Soay traveled to the Navy Yard in Philadelphia to record the sounds of machine guns and airplane propellers.<sup>3</sup> Paramount did the same with its baseball picture, *Warming Up*, even adding a few shouts of encouragement from the crowd.<sup>4</sup> Six months later it was reported that Tiffany-Stahl was “synchronizing” some of its short-film product in Camden, including *Hawaiian Love Call*.<sup>5</sup> This sort of scoring might have been done in any adequate recording studio, but in January 1929 Columbia, a low-budget Hollywood producer, sent Bert Lytell to Camden to film talking sequences for a feature, *The Lone Wolf’s Daughter*.<sup>6</sup>

Columbia would continue to use the studio in Camden for the production of musical shorts through the end of 1929. By early June, director Basil Smith had

completed eleven of a projected forty-two titles. All but forgotten today, these New Jersey-produced Columbia talkies included Tony Sarg's Marionettes in *In the Orient*, *Jailhouse Blues* with Mamie Smith, Jimmy Rodgers in *The Singing Brakeman*, Ginger Rogers in *A Day of a Man of Affairs*, and Jules Bledsoe, the original "Joe" in Ziegfeld's production of *Show Boat*, in *Old Man Trouble*.<sup>7</sup> One would especially like to see *At a Talkie Studio*, starring the falsetto blackface performer Buddy Doyle. Even after the Victor operation became part of RCA, David Sarnoff continued to rent out the small studio in Camden as a way of promoting the RCA Photophone system, just as he had been doing at the Gramercy studio in New York. Activity in Camden was scheduled to move to Manhattan as soon as the expansion of that studio was completed, but the Gramercy studio never reopened after the Pathé fire.<sup>8</sup>

Another operation that began as a synchronization house but soon graduated to the production of talking shorts was Powers Cinephone, initially located at 723 Seventh Avenue. Industry pioneer Pat Powers, an important figure in the creation of Universal, had failed in his bid to gain control of Lee De Forest's Phonofilm system. With the aid of William Garity, one of De Forest's old associates, he then marketed a similar process called Cinephone.<sup>9</sup> In late 1928 Powers announced that he was hiring veteran B-movie director Harry Revier to direct *Chopin's Passion*, with James Bradford in charge of synchronization.<sup>10</sup> An important potential market for all these competing sound systems had appeared in August, when the Paul Terry cartoon *Dinner Time*, promoted as the "first cartoon in sound," opened in New York at the Mark Strand (critics and audiences had apparently forgotten Max Fleischer's earlier use of the Phonofilm). The synchronization was the work of Josiah Zuro, music director of the Pathé studio.<sup>11</sup>

Only days after the announcement of a second sound cartoon from Pathé, *Film Daily* ran the following item on page one: "Four of a series of 26 new, all sound animated cartoons to be made by Walter Disney, creator of the Oswald cartoons, are now in work at the new Powers Cinephone studio in New York. The new series is tentatively titled *Mickey Mouse*."<sup>12</sup> Walt Disney did not produce the first Mickey Mouse films at the Cinephone studio, but he did record their music and effects tracks there, because no similar rental facilities were yet available in Hollywood. Disney had been animating Universal's Oswald the Lucky Rabbit series, and when this franchise was taken away from him, he concocted a new series of his own featuring a similarly aggressive mouse.

Working with his friend and associate Ub Iwerks, Disney quickly made three of these films: *Plane Crazy*, *The Gallopin' Gaucho*, and *Steamboat Willie*, all on spec. If the first two films were conventional silent cartoons, *Steamboat Willie* was designed for sound. Not only did many of the gags incorporate music and effects, but the characters themselves throbbed to a predetermined beat. Silent cartoons had always been accompanied by music; what Disney wanted from *Steamboat Willie*



was an exact synchronization of sound and image, impossible with a live orchestra, in which the gags, the music, and the characters on screen would all be driven by the same infectious rhythm. As with the first live-action talkies, *Steamboat Willie* was primarily intended as a musical entertainment. Disney and his staff (essentially Wilfred Jackson, an assistant animator handy with a harmonica) had compiled a detailed sound score consisting of public domain favorites, squeals and grunts from various animals, and a series of goofy mechanical effects. They had also devised a method of animating to a specific beat and of guiding the orchestra to follow along during the recording session. What they did not have was the technology needed to accomplish all this.

Disney arrived in New York the day after Labor Day and immediately began looking for a sound system. RCA Photophone was available, but at a cost far beyond his limited budget. RCA did show Disney a print of *Dinner Time*, which had been made with its equipment, and he was relieved that Terry had not fully grasped the benefits of synchronization. "MY GOSH—TERRIBLE—A lot of racket and nothing else. . . . It merely had an orchestra playing and adding some noises. The talking part does not mean a thing. It doesn't even match. We sure have nothing to worry about from these quarters," he wrote to his associates in Hollywood.<sup>13</sup> But the orchestra he himself would use also failed to see the need of such close synchronization. Powers supplied Disney with Carl Edouarde, conductor at the Strand Theatre, and an orchestra of twenty men. These were highly experienced professionals who knew everything there was to know about accompanying a silent film and were in no mood to follow the dictates of Disney's metronome. But *Steamboat Willie* was not a silent film. The first attempt at a recording, on September 15, was a complete failure. Disney was forced to prepare a new print of the film: on one side of the image, a bouncing ball guided the musicians to the exact synchronization he required. Using a smaller group, and performing many of the effects himself, Disney successfully recorded the *Steamboat Willie* soundtrack on September 30.<sup>14</sup>

By the time the *Film Daily* notified its readers of Disney's project, *Steamboat Willie* had already been booked into the Colony Theatre by Harry Reichenbach, the most sensational of the era's press agents, who saw to it that the film received the coverage it deserved.<sup>15</sup> It opened there on November 18 in support of *Gang War*, another film that had been started on the West Coast and finished in the sound studios of New York. Success was immediate. "It is impossible to describe this riot of mirth," one critic insisted, "but it knocked me out of my seat."<sup>16</sup>

Working with Carl Stalling, who had joined him in New York on October 26, Disney synchronized three more cartoons at the Cinephone studio (in addition to *Plane Crazy* and *The Gallopin' Gaucho*, Ub Iwerks had since completed another Mickey Mouse cartoon, *The Barn Dance*).<sup>17</sup> After nearly three months in New York, Disney returned to the West Coast with cash in his pocket and a distribution con-

tract from Pat Powers himself. Although Walt's brother Roy would criticize the details of this agreement, no other distributor had been willing to allow the Walt Disney Company to retain all rights to the films—the basis of Disney's future empire. In addition, Disney also wound up acquiring William Garity; Powers sent him out to install Cinephone apparatus at the Disney studio, and he stayed on to become one of the key members of Disney's production team (*Fantasia's* stereophonic Fantasound track was largely Bill Garity's achievement).<sup>18</sup>

Although the "Disney Cartoon Studio" maintained a mailing address at 723 Seventh Avenue as late as 1930, Disney returned only once, to work on the synchronization of *The Opry House* and *The Skeleton Dance* in February 1929.<sup>19</sup> Powers soon moved the studio operation to a converted factory building at 29-20 40th Avenue in Long Island City.<sup>20</sup> Harry Delf was said to be filming a dozen "Powers Pow Wows" here, but there is no record of their release.<sup>21</sup> A year later Joseph Rothman opened the Caravel Studio at 29-18 40th Avenue, using the same technical crews: George Crapp as chief sound engineer and Jules Sindic as camera department head. Despite the announcement that Hope Emerson (then starring in *Lysistrata*) had been signed for a series of comedies and that additional features and shorts were to be made by John Abbott, nothing more was heard from Cinephone as a producer.<sup>22</sup> In fact, Powers was interested not in being his own producer, but in making his apparatus available as a low-cost alternative to RCA and Western Electric. He advertised his mobile sound trucks as "West Coast facilities for East Coast Producers," thus empowering not only Walt Disney but a stream of East Coast independents as well.<sup>23</sup>

There were many similar efforts at opening a "studio" in order to promote a proprietary sound system. Vocafilm, a sound-on-disc process controlled by David R. Hochreich, opened in a loft building at 122 Fifth Avenue in the summer of 1928. Larry Williams and Edward Harten were listed as cameramen.<sup>24</sup> Although Hochreich announced that he had signed up everyone from Maurice Schwartz to the original company of *The Shanghai Gesture*, none of those films was ever made.<sup>25</sup> Eugene Spitz took control of Vocafilm in March 1929 and changed the name of the studio to Cromotone.<sup>26</sup> There were few customers. Advance Productions was said to have filmed a series of musical shorts and a single-reel novelty act here featuring the Siamese Twin Gibbs Sisters, which Frank Abrams produced and Irving Browning photographed.<sup>27</sup>

The only significant production at Cromotone was *North of 49°*, notorious as "the first Canadian talkie," but more properly described by historian Peter Morris as a "swindle" perpetrated by producer William Steiner.<sup>28</sup> Steiner and his star, Neal Hart, made low-budget Westerns for the states rights market. They became involved with British-Canadian Pictures, a company in Calgary set up to profit from the recent British quota legislation, and in the summer of 1928 filmed *His Destiny*, a silent Western set amidst the annual Calgary Stampede. In December the film opened

in Canada to generally good notices, but Steiner refused to promote it further unless his Canadian partners paid to create a talking version, which would have to be made in New York. This was an absurd demand, given the nature of the B-Western market at the time, but Steiner persuaded the Canadians to fund the new version, which was eventually released as *North of 49°*. Filming took place at the Chromotone studios under the direction of Eugene Roder between May and August 1929 (the spelling of the studio's name appears to have changed in the interim). Neal Hart, Wilfred Lucas, Ruth Thomas, and other stars of the silent version dubbed their own voices for the soundtrack.<sup>29</sup> But *North of 49°* was no *Steamboat Willie*. "It, too, did not do as well as Steiner predicted," Morris writes. "The company folded and the only person for whom it was profitable was William Steiner."<sup>30</sup> As for the Vocafilm/Chromotone Studio, it never reopened after the Pathé fire in December.

The most significant of the proprietary sound systems, Lee De Forest's Phonofilm, had been fighting a losing battle at the East 48th Street studio for almost a decade. In December 1927 De Forest sold Phonofilm to I. W. Schlesinger, and Schlesinger created General Talking Pictures the following August to operate the studio.<sup>31</sup> Although it was open for business only a single year, the De Forest Phonofilm/General Talking Pictures studio was among the most active of the early rental facilities, hosting at least three features and a wide range of shorts. Local producer Johnnie Walker was the first to use the studio when he and Howard E. Rogers co-directed *Blackface* in January 1929. The film starred Broadway legend Peggy Wood and was photographed by Phil Tannura, but it may never have been released (like Judith Anderson's *Madame of the Jury* for Vitaphone, it was probably a short, vaudeville-style one-act).<sup>32</sup> Peggy Wood was followed by Harry Delf, who directed a series of short comedies here, including *At the Photographer's* and *Meet the Family*, before moving to the Powers studio in Long Island City.<sup>33</sup>

In April, management of the studio was turned over to the Weiss brothers (Adolph, Louis, and Max), who already occupied a niche near the bottom of Hollywood's poverty row.<sup>34</sup> They rented the stage to producers like Photocolor, whose *Ballet d'amour* and *Romany Lass* (directed by Basil Smith) were distributed by Columbia.<sup>35</sup> When business was light, they produced Snub Pollard comedies for their own Artclass label. *Here We Are*, directed by Les Goodwins, was said to be the second of a planned dozen two-reelers starring the once-popular silent comic.<sup>36</sup> The Weiss brothers also produced two of their own features here: *Unmasked*, a detective story featuring silent star Robert Warwick; and *Damaged Love*, a sentimental tearjerker with future B-Western star Charles Starrett and June Collyer as "the other woman." Director Irvin Willat was imported from Hollywood for the occasion. The last feature made at the De Forest studio was an independent production from Windsor Picture Plays, *Her Unborn Child*. A barnstorming melodrama that had been successfully produced on Broadway just the year before (Elisha Cook Jr.

repeated from the original cast), it was one of the few films of the day to deal with the issues of abortion and illegitimacy. “Grimmer side of sex,” *Photoplay* warned its readers. “Sad faces, sad scenes. Excuse us for yawning.”<sup>37</sup> Although such low-end product appears to have kept it busy throughout 1929, the De Forest studio, like so many others, never reopened after the Pathé fire.

The original “full service” rental studio, Tec-Art, had abandoned New York when silent film production went into a rapid decline in 1926. Now its main studio at 344 West 44th Street, originally the Tilford Cinema Studio, was leased by E. B. Kohlenbeck’s American Sound Studios. Kohlenbeck took a ten-year lease and began construction on a 50 × 100-foot soundstage inside the cavernous old studio space, which he planned to rent out when not filming his own series of twelve two-reel comedies. His star was Phyllis Dore, and titles included *School Day Frolics*.<sup>38</sup> Female impersonator Rene Caron made *Surprise to All* in December 1929, but after a few weeks nothing more was heard from American Sound.<sup>39</sup> In addition to potential problems with the fire marshal, oversupply in the short-film market eventually doomed such low-budget operations, especially those without access to established distribution circuits.

American Sound Studios, like De Forest/General Talking Pictures, was housed in a resuscitated silent movie studio. Other rental studios in Manhattan, such as Cinephone and Vocafile, were new operations squeezed into conventional industrial space. But in New Jersey, so many abandoned silent movie stages littered the countryside that, except for the tiny Victor facility, all the early sound studios were housed in stages originally built during the heyday of silent feature pictures, fifteen years earlier.

### Back to New Jersey

At first it seemed that Fort Lee’s Paragon studio, where features had been made as late as 1926, would be the first to reopen. Louis Schwartz of Fotovox (another proprietary sound-on-disc system) announced that he had signed George Jessel and Jack Pearl for a series of shorts to be made in what he now called the Aurora studio.<sup>40</sup> But no sound films were ever made at the Paragon, which soon became a spectacular ruin. In a short documentary made on the site a few years later by amateur filmmakers Theodore Huff and Mark Borgatta, hundreds of reels of film can be seen scattered over a large area.<sup>41</sup> When cameraman Irving Browning toured the abandoned Fort Lee studio sites in 1945, the Paragon had the look of a bombed-out European capital: “It was like walking into a ghost city, seeing all the steel framework and glass, much of it broken. . . . Weeds have grown high where once feet of many thousands trod when this studio was in full production.”<sup>42</sup> In fact, part of the

structure was still being used for the painting and storage of stage scenery. The end finally came on March 23, 1952, when a spectacular fire shot flames one hundred feet in the air and destroyed a million dollars' worth of stored settings, including those for the road company of *Oklahoma!* and the local *Ellery Queen* television series.<sup>43</sup>

The Ideal studio, located on a bluff high above the Hudson River, opposite 86th Street in Manhattan, at first seemed an even less likely candidate for rehabilitation. Herbert Brenon had made a number of important films at the Hudson Heights studio between 1916 and 1918, but it had been vacant for years when O. W. Biarmar announced in October 1928 that he was renovating the old stages for talkies.<sup>44</sup> There were few customers until 1930, when spillover from the now closed RKO studio reached Hudson Heights. Photocolor, still waiting for the completion of its own studio in Irvington-on-Hudson, moved some production to Ideal, including Bradley Barker's *Ye Olde Heart Shoppe*.<sup>45</sup> Producer Lou Brock and director Mark Sandrich also came over from the Gramercy studio, taking with them RKO's "Nick and Tony" series, an Italian stereotype act featuring Nick Basil and Tony Martin (Henry Armetta replaced Martin in May). Their films included *Barnum Was Wrong* (originally to be shot in Brewster Color), *Off to Peoria*, and *Who's Got the Body?*<sup>46</sup> In May, Sandrich began directing RKO's "Clark and McCullough" series at Ideal.<sup>47</sup>

RKO crews worked on these short comedies in Hudson Heights for about five months before the studio finally consolidated all of its production on the West Coast.<sup>48</sup> Today the only one of these films commonly available is not one of the series pictures, but a one-shot performance starring an old vaudevillian doing his best to break into talkies, W. C. Fields. According to biographer Simon Louvish, Fields was signed for *The Golf Specialist* through the intercession of his old patron, William Le Baron, now head of production for RKO.<sup>49</sup> Fields had followed the rest of the Astoria unit to Hollywood in 1927, but the three silent features he made there for Paramount were unsuccessful, and he returned to Broadway. He had been performing his famous golf sketch at the Palace (his last appearance in vaudeville) just before filming this canned version in late April 1930.<sup>50</sup> The two-reeler was directed by Monte Brice and photographed by Frank Zucker. Ernst Fegté, art director for the Gramercy studios, received screen credit, even though he had officially returned to work for Paramount two months before.<sup>51</sup>

Just as with *Animal Crackers*, filmed simultaneously in Astoria, the cameramen on *The Golf Specialist* often had a hard time keeping the actors in frame. There are only two sets, a palpably artificial golf green and a modest hotel lobby. Fields's first line of dialogue, "Any telegrams? Cablegrams? Radio? Television?" muttered in his trademark drawl, immediately marks him as one of those vaudevillians whose future success in talkies would surpass anything they had achieved in silent pictures. (The reference to television was unusually topical; several experimental stations were already on the air in New York and New Jersey when this film was shot.) *The*

*Golf Specialist* not only presents the best surviving record of a Fields stage routine, but also captures his extraordinarily dark comic persona at its most extreme. There is no trace of the sentimentalizing seen in both his silent and sound features, designed to make this character more appealing to a wider public. Just as Erich von Stroheim challenged audiences by making his protagonist a villain, Fields created this comic version of “the man you love to hate,” a cheat and a coward who hates dogs and robs small children of their pennies. Fields had begun on stage as a tramp juggler, a character completely apart from society. Unlike Chaplin, however, this tramp was no idealized everyman, and to succeed in films he needed to be domesticated, transformed into a grumbling bourgeois worn down by home and family. *The Golf Specialist* gave audiences their last look at the original version.

Later in 1930 Louis Simon, who had previously been acting in George Le Maire’s shorts for Pathé, appeared in a series of “Simple Simon” comedies at Ideal, at least one of which was directed by Morton Blumenstock. Titles included *Hot Shivers* and *Radio Madness*.<sup>52</sup> A few months later the studio hosted its first feature, *Puss in Boots*, a children’s operetta by Nathaniel Shilkret and Robert A. Simon. Shilkret and his Victor Salon Orchestra accompanied a cast composed almost entirely of children, many from the Elsa Greenwood Juveniles company.<sup>53</sup> Compact and convenient, Ideal was seldom the first choice of any producer, but it remained remarkably busy in the years following the Pathé fire. Early in 1932 even Bill Robinson was working there, starring in his first musical feature, *Harlem Is Heaven*.<sup>54</sup>

The old E. K. Lincoln studio in Grantwood was also wired for sound, reopening in August 1931 as the Royal studio and targeting the short-film market. Ned Wayburn, Charles Bowers, and Frank S. Amon were said to be working there. There was one large 96 × 65-foot soundstage and a smaller 64 × 36-foot stage in reserve, as well as a 35 × 46-foot swimming tank. RCA installed Photophone equipment here as part of its effort to corner the independent market.<sup>55</sup> In February 1932 Royal announced that Harry Langdon would make a series of two-reelers there, a comeback attempt by a star who had fallen farther, and faster, than any silent screen favorite. The first of these, *The Show Goat*, was made that month with Ina Hayward, Maryann Lynn, Barbara Willison, and various others in support. The studio applied to the local building authorities for a permit to construct a “Breakaway set,” presumably for use in the Langdon film, on February 13.<sup>56</sup> Suddenly, *Film Daily* was reporting that “Harry Langdon’s new picture . . . has been changed to a feature. Those who have seen the picture claim that Langdon staged such a marvelous comeback in the two-reeler it was decided to make it into a feature.”<sup>57</sup> The “feature” was back in production by the end of March, and that was the last anyone ever heard of it.<sup>58</sup> No made-in-New Jersey Harry Langdon feature or short has ever been identified. Whatever Langdon made at the Royal studio immediately disappeared into the black hole of film financing, distribution difficulties, or “creative differences.”



Ultimately, it was the historic Peerless studio on Lewis Street in Fort Lee that became the first, and most successful, of New Jersey's early talkie studios. Phil Goldstone, a low-budget producer from the West Coast, gained control of the studio with the idea of soundproofing it and making it available to other independents (a route the Weiss brothers would pursue at General Talking Pictures the following year). Goldstone used a sound-on-disc process, first announced as Tonefilm, later as Biophone.<sup>59</sup> The Johns-Manville company was installing soundproofing in the "Metropolitan Sound Studios" in October 1928 when fumes connected with the installation process exploded, killing one man and injuring fourteen others. Although the explosion was felt as far away as the neighboring town of Edgewater, many people in the vicinity at first failed to respond, confusing the blast with dynamiting already under way in connection with construction of the George Washington Bridge.<sup>60</sup> Undeterred, Goldstone proceeded with a series of comedy shorts, including *The Honeymooners* and *The Gossips*.<sup>61</sup>

As was the case with the other eastern sound studios, there was an initial demand in New Jersey for the addition of synchronized tracks to existing silent pictures. Several independent features, including Mrs. Wallace Reid's *Linda* and Martin and Osa Johnson's travelogue *Simba*, were "Biophoned" at the Metropolitan.<sup>62</sup> But Goldstone's studio was also the first in the nation to offer independent producers access to real soundstages. The first live-action feature to occupy the stages was *The House of Secrets*, a mystery-melodrama produced by Chesterfield, a poverty-row operation from Hollywood. In production by April 11, 1929, the film was ready for the critics six weeks later, who received it fairly well as the first all-talker from a "smaller" studio.<sup>63</sup> It was directed by Edmund Lawrence and photographed by George Webber, Irving Browning, George Peters, and Lester Lang, the large crew suggesting the multi-camera set-ups required by long, uninterrupted dialogue sequences.

In the summer of 1929 Rayart Pictures Corporation began to film a series of musical shorts at Metropolitan featuring Tommy Christian and His Palisades Orchestra.<sup>64</sup> By September this project had grown to include a feature film, *Howdy Broadway*, and the shorts *Cotton Pickin' Time*, *Moments of Melody*, and *The Musical Sailor*.<sup>65</sup> *Howdy Broadway* is a college musical in which the hero, caught at a roadhouse, is thrown out of school and soon makes his fortune on Broadway. The script is entirely predictable, and the direction, by Charles J. Hunt (who also wrote the film), is listless and incompetent. Settings and performances display the cheap, tired character of a thousand other B pictures. Unlike the equally threadbare films that Oscar Micheaux would soon be making at Metropolitan, *Howdy Broadway* offers nothing to suggest any degree of pride, interest, or imagination on the part of those who made it. The film was not copyrighted, nor was it listed in Rayart's annual release schedule as published in the *Film Daily Yearbook of Motion Pictures*. If a copy did not exist, it would be easy to conclude that *Howdy Broadway* was never released,

or perhaps never actually made. Because so many films produced in the East at this time were equally marginal (and therefore hard to research), historians have generally found it easier to conclude that there simply was no film production going on outside Paramount or Warner Bros., a complete misreading of the often feverish activity actually taking place.

A mediocre film like *Howdy Broadway* can take on a certain significance if we understand it not simply as a failed copy of a Hollywood picture, but as an incremental step in the development of New York's indigenous brand of independent cinema. Harry Alan Potamkin, the brilliant film critic of *New Masses* and other left-wing journals of the day, detected what he described as "our New York school" of filmmaking as early as 1929. Potamkin understood this school to be opposed to Hollywood cinema on some primal level, although he died before he could outline the distinctions in any detail. Nevertheless, in a series of essays published in the British film journal *Close Up*, Potamkin linked the work of Mamoulian and Monta Bell at Astoria, the avant-garde experiments of Ralph Steiner, James Sibley Watson, and Melville Webber, and a new film genre he first experienced in a small theater in the Bronx, the Yiddish talkie. Potamkin describes *The Eternal Prayer* (Ad Mosay) as an incompetent mess, "about the worst film ever made, indicating absolutely no knowledge of the cinema, even the most elementary." Still, something about the film made it "of singular importance to any genuinely perspicacious student of the cinema": the introduction of faces, voices, and gestures previously unknown in American film, what Potamkin referred to as "unexploited cinema plastic material."<sup>66</sup>

*The Eternal Prayer* is the film that occupied the Metropolitan stages as soon as *Howdy Broadway* was completed.<sup>67</sup> Basically a series of filmed liturgical episodes, it displays none of the cinematic acrobatics that Potamkin, steeped in the traditions of Soviet cinema, expected from intelligent filmmaking. Indeed, if he had continued to follow the output of the Metropolitan studio, Potamkin might never have found a film that could satisfy his own exacting artistic standards. What he would have recognized, however, was that his original assessment of the New York school was correct: the local product and the films he saw coming from Hollywood were two very different things.

The fire at the Pathé studio may have doomed many of the smaller New York soundstages, but those in New Jersey were more than willing to take up the slack. Whether they were safer to work in, or merely outside the control of New York's fire marshals, is hard to say. Metropolitan was among the first of the New Jersey studios to benefit when Pathé announced it would shift all its eastern production there in January 1930 (including the retake version of *Sixteen Sweeties*).<sup>68</sup> Because the Gramercy studio had been forced to close, RKO sent Lou Brock and Al Boasberg to Metropolitan to continue producing their Radiant comedies, including *Pullman*

*Car*, *Prize Fights*, and *The Speculator* (although within a few weeks RKO's New Jersey activity seems to have concentrated at the Ideal studio).<sup>69</sup>

By May, Metropolitan had upgraded its sound equipment to the tune of several hundred thousand dollars and could boast that thirty films had been shot there in the past two months.<sup>70</sup> That summer Harry Revier directed Cullen Landis in *The Convict's Code*, another low-budget melodrama intended for the states rights market.<sup>71</sup> Now the studio was ready for the biggest production it had seen since silent days, a religious epic, financed by Mormon interests, to be called *Corianton*. Described as a grand spectacle in the tradition of *Ben-Hur*, *Corianton* dramatized events in America's pre-Columbian history as recounted in *The Book of Mormon*. Silent film veteran Wilfred North directed, although he had worked only as an actor since 1924. The six-week shooting schedule (extremely long for an independent film) wrapped on January 12, 1931, with scenes of a "bacchanalian orgy" involving "practically every available night club entertainer in New York."<sup>72</sup> Following a disastrous screening in Salt Lake City, the outraged backers pulled *Corianton* from distribution, and it remained unseen for more than seventy-five years.<sup>73</sup>

The "first Mormon talkie" was followed immediately by the first all-talking race movie, Oscar Micheaux's *The Exile*, and as many as three Italian-language features, all shot before the end of 1931.<sup>74</sup> Frank Zucker appears to have photographed all these Italian films, as well as *Enemies of the Law*, a gangster film starring Mary



One of the Aztec-inspired sets constructed at the Metropolitan studio in Fort Lee, New Jersey, for the Mormon epic *Corianton* (1931). Emile Yosuff as Prince Seantum. © Brigham Young University. All rights reserved. Reproduced by permission.

Nolan and Johnnie Walker, which Sherman Krellberg produced at Metropolitan in April 1931.<sup>75</sup> Zucker's connection with Metropolitan may or may not have been contractual; Joe Ruttenberg, Don Malkames, Larry Williams, J. Burgi Contner, and other local cameramen did develop relationships with specific rental studios during this period, one way of assuring a certain amount of work in a marketplace that had turned almost entirely freelance. Zucker later founded Camera Equipment Company (CECO), New York's leading equipment rental house.

As if this production program was not eclectic enough, Metropolitan also hosted one of the first all-talking features intended specifically as a children's film, *Alice in Wonderland*, starring Ruth Gilbert and directed by Bud Pollard. *Alice in Wonderland* opened at the Warners' Theatre on Times Square, where *The Jazz Singer* had premiered four years earlier. But the picture palace ambiance only emphasized the distance between Pollard's modest effort and the scale of the usual Hollywood epic. "There is an earnestness about the direction and the acting that elicits sympathy," the *Times* wrote with unusual condescension, "for poor little Alice had to go through the ordeal of coming to shadow life in an old studio in Fort Lee, N.J., instead of enjoying the manifold advantages of her rich cousins who hop from printed pages to the screen amid the comfort of a well-equipped Hollywood studio."<sup>76</sup> At a time when 16mm sound equipment was just being introduced, *Alice in Wonderland* was made available as a first-run attraction in both 16 and 35mm, an effort by the distributor, Unique-Cosmos Pictures, to erase the line between the theatrical and nontheatrical markets.<sup>77</sup>

As 1932 approached, with Warners laying off staff and Paramount threatening to abandon New York entirely, production was booming at Metropolitan. Although this activity had very little to do with the conventional manner of producing and distributing films practiced in Hollywood, it did demonstrate the ability of independent producers to create new markets by identifying segments of the audience not being served by Hollywood films and to find ways of their own to offer an alternative. As the *Film Daily* remarked to its industry audience in 1931, "pictures made here [in the East] have a different slant, providing needed variety on a crowded schedule."<sup>78</sup>

### Speaking in Tongues

Perhaps the most interesting independent filmmakers operating in New York in the early sound period were the various ethnic and racial producers. Before sound, the only viable ethnic niche had been occupied by the race film producers, for whom dialogue was not a central issue. Silent cinema was very conscious of its status as a "universal language" that could transcend the barriers of theater or written

literature, and the introduction of sound threatened to change these rules. But if the lack of linguistic portability was a major liability for the talkies, it also encouraged the production of films that spoke to immigrant audiences in Yiddish, Italian, Arabic, Serbo-Croatian, Greek, Spanish, Armenian, and Ukrainian. New York was already a center of race film production. Now, drawing on the well-developed theatrical traditions of these European émigrés, it would become a center of ethnic filmmaking as well.<sup>79</sup>

Representatives of half a dozen different language groups produced their own films in New York and New Jersey during the first years of sound, and in almost every instance their production and marketing followed the same pattern. The first examples would focus primarily on music, either religious or secular, and were often targeted at the same audience as every other film, opening in midtown theaters and eliciting reviews from general-interest newspapers. But as soon as a foreign-speaking niche audience was identified, producers rushed to film that group's literary classics and immigrant-themed melodramas, often drawing on resident theater companies that already had these works in their repertory. Advertising in general-interest publications ceased, and venues moved from conventional first-run houses to local theaters in immigrant communities. Although the creative talent involved was ethnically specific, all groups shared the same limited number of technicians and rental studios. Because the home country was often several years behind in producing its own talkies, films made in America could be successfully exported, and theaters in immigrant neighborhoods carried no foreign competition. But once high-quality talking films began to be produced overseas, the market for these low-budget American versions collapsed. (The pattern differs slightly with Yiddish films, for reasons that will be made clear.)

Nearly all Spanish-language films produced in the United States were made on the West Coast, but at least one series of two-reelers was produced by Empire Productions at the Metropolitan studio late in 1929. According to Juan Heinink and Robert Dickson, a dozen films were directed there by Edmund Lawrence and Arcady Boytler. These were short comedies and musicals featuring such popular local performers as Boytler, Fortunio Bonanova, and Rodolfo Hoyos. The films were distributed in South America, but also played the Regent Theatre on 116th Street and Seventh Avenue early in 1930.<sup>80</sup> Another local producer, Thalia, later claimed that it would make Spanish versions of its Italian-language films, but no such films have been identified.<sup>81</sup>

In fact, Italian-language film production in New York and New Jersey between 1930 and 1932 was surprisingly ambitious. There is some evidence that Italian producers shot silent films here in the 1920s, but details are sketchy. Giuliana Bruno suggests that the New York branch of the Italian producer Dora Film, whose output was largely directed at the Italian American audience, may have made several films

locally in the 1920s, including *New York Underworld after Dark*, *Italy in America*, and *The Converted Jewess*. "One concludes that Dora Film of America either made these films in New York or adapted Neapolitan footage into 'New York stories,'" she writes in her account of Dora Film and its principal producer, Elvira Notari.<sup>82</sup> In any case, unlike the situation in the race film industry, already well developed by producers like Oscar Micheaux, there was no existing market in which local producers might offer their own Italian-language cinema.

The first locally produced Italian-language features were adaptations of operas clearly intended for general art house distribution. Audio-Cinema produced *I Pagliacci*, featuring the San Carlo Opera Company, in March 1930; its *Otello*, with tenor Manuel Salazar, was said to have been directed by Roberto Natalini at the Metropolitan studio in May.<sup>83</sup> *I Pagliacci* was obviously designed as something more than a simple ethnic production and was the opening attraction at Leo Brecher's newly renamed Central Park Theatre.<sup>84</sup> *Otello*, intended as the first of an ambitious series of filmed operas, was described by the *Film Daily* as "completed," but may never have had a general release.

Audio-Cinema was not really an ethnic producer, so the Thalia Amusement Corporation can probably be credited as the first successful Italian American producer of talkies. It filmed *Così è la vita* (Such Is Life) at the Metropolitan studio in October 1931, with Eugene Roder directing from a story by Armando Cennerazzo. A family melodrama set in Naples, the film starred Miriam Battista (once the child star of Frank Borzage's *Humoresque*) and Eduardo Cianelli, later a familiar Hollywood Italian.<sup>85</sup> In December it was reported that Thalia would release a two-reel version of *La Traviata*, featuring "artists from the La Scala Opera Company." Thalia announced other productions over the next several months, including *Rondinella* with Gilda Mignonette (Roder was again to have directed), but no further Thalia releases have been documented.<sup>86</sup>

Angelo De Vito (producer) and Harold Godsoe (director) filmed *Cuore d'emigrante* for the S. Luisa Company at the Metropolitan studio almost as soon as *Così è la vita* had cleared the stage.<sup>87</sup> Although the film opened under this title, within a few months its name had been changed to *Santa Lucia Luntana* to accommodate a popular song spliced onto the head of the picture. A rare example of a surviving Italian American feature, *Santa Lucia Luntana* indicates how the language barrier between first- and second-generation immigrants (and anyone else in the audience) could be managed without the use of subtitles or title cards. For the benefit of their "American" friends, the younger members of the cast constantly translate or comment on the dialogue of their elders, who speak in a Neapolitan dialect. The strategy not only makes the film available to much wider audiences, it is also an implicit comment on the generational gulf that lies at the heart of the film. The immigrant family of Don Ciccio Mauri has been torn apart by the corrupting



influence of “American style.” One daughter is infected by jazz, the son has fallen in with gangsters, and sexual harassment forces the good daughter, Elena, out of her job. Maintaining traditional Neapolitan values in Manhattan’s tenement district proves impossible. “Ah! America! A wonderful country . . . rich . . . beautiful . . . but for whom????” Don Ciccio cries out.<sup>88</sup> Half of the family returns to Naples, while its more acculturated members, now completely Americanized, stay behind. An unconvincing coda assures us that both groups prosper (the repentant gangster becomes a wealthy contractor!). De Vito and Godsoe (now working as Cinema Productions, Inc.) teamed again on *Senza mamma e’nnamurato* (Without a Mother and a Sweetheart), shot in the summer of 1932.<sup>89</sup> As in their earlier film, the sexual harassment of women who work outside the home was a major plot element. The new film featured Rosina De Stefano, an opera singer, and Catherine Campagnone, billed as “Miss Italy of 1932.”

The Aurora Film Corporation was founded by Rosario Romeo and J. Lombardi in the summer of 1931. Although production of their first film, *Amore e morte* (Love and Death) was supposed to have begun in July or August, it does not seem to have been shot until the middle of 1932. A wild Sicilian melodrama of madness and misalliance, the film starred Romeo and members of the Teatro d’Arte, a local Italian-language theater company that could usually be found staging Pirandello premieres in Little Italy. Sicily was reconstructed in the Watchung Mountains of north central New Jersey, with additional location work in Peekskill, New York. Interiors were shot at the Standard Sound Recording Studio at 216 East 38th Street. The *New York Times* was particularly impressed with the scenery and location work, which transformed the New Jersey landscape into “a striking illusion of the approaches to Etna in Eastern Sicily.”<sup>90</sup>

Not only was *Amore e morte* reviewed by the *New York Times*; it opened at the Selwyn Theatre on Times Square, clearly an appeal to a broader, non-Italian audience. Supporting it on the bill was a one-reel short, *Attore cinematografico* (The Movie Actor), a vehicle for the Italian American dialect comedian known as Farfariello. The film was made at the same time and in the same studio, although credited to a different producer. Look carefully and you can see a newspaper insert announcing auditions being held by the “Aurora Film Corp.” at its offices on West 42nd Street. It is often extremely difficult to determine who produced these independent ethnic films, where they were made, and even what year they were shot. Another surviving short, the musical *Alba Novella e Ralph Pedì cantando le canzoni “Il Gondoliere” e “Il Tango della Gelosia,”* preserved by the George Eastman House, carries only the credit of a subsequent distributor. Alba Novella sang the leading female role in Audio’s *I Pagliacci*, which suggests local production, but exactly when and where is impossible to say.

Perhaps the most ambitious of all these local productions was *Genoveva*, made by

Jersey Italo America Phono Film in 1932. Exteriors for this medieval costume epic were shot at Lambert's Castle in Paterson, New Jersey, a great mill owner's mansion that would later be home to the Passaic County Historical Society (interiors appear to have been staged at the Newark Motion Picture Studio, a small industrial film operation located at 845 Broad Street). The film is far more technically sophisticated than the typical low-budget production, and director Giulio Amauli and cameraman Domenico Bovasa even managed a few exterior tracking shots with direct dialogue recording. With horses in short supply, spectacle was provided through battle sequences lifted from a silent Italian epic. This stock footage is cleverly matched to the new scenes featuring local actors, available costumes, and the battlements of Lambert's Castle. Giuseppe De Luca, who had prepared the musical score for *Senza mamma e'nmamurato*, did the same for *Genoveva*.

Joseph Seiden, who had previously operated a small studio on East 38th Street, was now running the Sight and Sound Studios at 33 West 60th Street. The new facility would often be used for the production of Yiddish films, but whenever Seiden worked on an Italian picture, he appears to have billed himself as "Joe Sedita." *Amor in montagna*, a bucolic melodrama produced by Alta Phonofilm Company in the Catskills near Cairo, New York, was completed at Sight and Sound in December 1932. Like *Amore e morte*, it had a large cast, and the production team seems to have taken pains to re-create the Italian landscape for the film's immigrant audience.<sup>91</sup> *Parigi affascina* (Paris Fascinates), made at Sight and Sound for Excelsior TalkFilm Productions, followed immediately.

As early as 1930, Seiden had discovered a process with which he could rehabilitate obsolete silent film footage by adding a "synchronous lecture." In an article in *Cinematography*, the house organ of the New York cameramen's union, Seiden urged fellow union members to seize this idea before the major distributors stumbled on it. He claimed to have already applied the technique to several films intended for local foreign-language audiences, at a cost of \$150 to \$250 per reel.<sup>92</sup> For *Parigi affascina* the original source material seems to have been an obscure 1928 silent, *The Masked Lover*, revitalized by a few musical numbers shot in the studio.<sup>93</sup> There wasn't enough room for very much more. Steve Jones, a soundman who worked at many of the early New York talkie studios, remembered the Sight and Sound operation as so cramped that it could not accommodate all the crew members required for union production.<sup>94</sup>

Seiden's technique was enthusiastically taken up by Bud Pollard, who directed *O festino o la legge* (Thou Shalt Not Kill) at the Metropolitan studio in 1932. According to the *American Film Institute Catalog*, this, too, was basically a silent film with voice-over narration and a few added musical sequences spliced in. In one episode, says the *Catalog*, "The singers relate making love on the ferry to the Battery in New York and acknowledge that it isn't the bay of Naples, and that in the place of



Main title cards for *Genoveva* (1932), one of the most ambitious of the locally produced foreign-language features. Courtesy of Jugoslovenska kinoteka.

Vesuvius stand skyscrapers,” a neat metaphor for the tensions underlying all these multicultural productions.<sup>95</sup>

Statistics help clarify the reasons for the rapid rise and fall of Italian production in New York. According to the 1933 *Motion Picture Almanac*, twenty-six theaters in the United States regularly booked Italian-language films, all of them in New York and New Jersey. A market certainly existed, and Italy had been slow to service it: the first four talkies produced in Italy were not made until 1930.<sup>96</sup> Italian American entrepreneurs, with access to such local rental studios as the Metropolitan, quickly rushed to fill this gap, trading on the talents of local opera companies and theater groups or celebrities like Farfariello. But most of these new companies were lucky to release a single film and were in no position to compete with the flow of real Italian talkies once they began to arrive in quantity. By comparison, the German American community, which was larger and wealthier and had a much more firmly established local theatrical tradition, never attempted to make its own talkies because German-language films were already being imported by 1929. (The same edition of the *Motion Picture Almanac* lists fifty-six venues for German-language films, spread all across the country.)



For a time, however, the appeal of homemade foreign-language production was extremely seductive, and even attracted such smaller groups as Arabs and Serbs. Arabic International Talking Pictures Company, headed by Joseph Arsan, produced two features in 1931, *Bride of the East* and *The Belle of Al-Mabrajan*, both in association with the Atlas Sound Film Recording Studio at 130 West 46th Street (the old Harry Levey studio). The first was a conventional saga of generational conflict, this time set in Beirut, in which old-fashioned parents stand in the way of their children's wish to marry for love. A sample of the dialogue might have come from any of these immigrant melodramas:

EDWARD: Well, Sweetheart, another afternoon spent among trees and flowers under Syria's beautiful sky, and every heavenly hour spent with you, dear. If only your father wouldn't make you dance in this dungeon.

EVELYN: Yes, and your father wouldn't agree with him and make your sister Sarah dance in there as well.

EDWARD: But think, dear, you are the toast of all Beirut, and I am only a poor cafe owner's son.<sup>97</sup>

Perhaps more interesting was Arabic International's subsequent production, *The Belle of Al-Mahrajan*. Here the boy-meets-girl plot was combined with documentary footage of the second annual carnival of the Lebanon League of Progress, held at Seaside Park near Bridgeport, Connecticut, on July 4, 1931. The hero and heroine fall in love while enjoying folk dancing, traditional comedy routines, and political speeches ("Long live Lebanon, and long live the Lebanon League of Progress!").<sup>98</sup>

The first Serbo-Croatian talkie, *Ljubav i strast* (Love and Passion), was produced by Yugoslavian Pictures, Inc. in November 1932. According to the *American Film Institute Catalog* it was "completed" at the Royal studio in Grantwood; but the president of Yugoslavian Pictures, Ben Berk, was also vice president and general manager of the Atlas Sound Film studio, so both facilities may have been used.<sup>99</sup> Frank Melford directed, and the ubiquitous Frank Zucker was one of the camera crew. Melford's wife, Raquel Davidovich, starred as "a beautiful Yugoslavian stenographer living in New York's Lower East Side." Most of the other actors were local amateurs. The film opened at the 72nd Street Playhouse on December 15 and was indulgently reviewed in the *New York Times*, although *Variety*, calculating the size of this particular ethnic group, felt its commercial chances were slim. "Maybe Melford figures to get his money back in Yugoslavia, where there's a film shortage," the reviewer concluded.<sup>100</sup> No subsequent locally produced Croatian or Serbian productions have been identified.

"Jewish subjects" were not especially rare in the silent era, but films like *Salome of the Tenements* (1925), made by Paramount in Astoria, were intended for general appeal and not aimed solely at an ethnic audience. Yiddish theater did not translate very well to the silent screen, although a few local producers made the attempt. Zion Films produced Sholom Aleichem's "Khavah" (released as *Broken Barriers*) in 1919, building a Russian village "somewhere in New Jersey" and filming interiors at the Estee studio on 125th Street.<sup>101</sup> Actors were drawn from the Irving Place Theatre and the Russian Opera Company. Twenty years later the same story would be filmed again, by Maurice Schwartz, as *Tevya* (1939). Schwartz directed at least one silent, *Tsebrokbene Hertser* (Broken Hearts, 1926), an ambitious adaptation by Frances Taylor Patterson of one of his Yiddish Art Theater favorites. Frank Zucker, already specializing in ethnic cinema, was the cameraman, and Schwartz co-starred with Lila Lee, moonlighting from her busy schedule at the Paramount Astoria studio.<sup>102</sup> But what role do silent films like these actually have in the history of Yiddish cinema? As Judith Goldberg puts it, "Until 1929, there were no real Yiddish films—none that literally spoke to their audience in Yiddish."<sup>103</sup>

Yiddish talkies would be centered at the RLA studio at 220 East 38th Street, where nearly every film in production from the spring of 1929 through the end of 1931 was intended for the racial or ethnic market. Recording Laboratories of

America had been founded by Jess Smith, who directed a series of race films there between March and May 1929 in conjunction with Lou Goldberg Productions.<sup>104</sup> No sooner were these completed than Smith announced that he would film Molly Picon in *My Yiddisher Baby*, the first of another series.<sup>105</sup> The RLA studio must have passed inspection by the fire marshal following the Pathé disaster, because it was still operating in August 1930, when Colorcraft produced *Pygmalion & Galatea* with Richard Irving and Royal Dana Tracy, a rare non-ethnic production.<sup>106</sup> And in January 1931 *Film Daily* reported that James Vincent was directing a Greek feature called *Such Is Life* at RLA for Hellenic Pictures Corporation, once again photographed by Frank Zucker.<sup>107</sup>

RLA came under the control of Joseph Seiden in 1930. A freelance cameraman who had once worked on silent Yiddish-themed films with director Sidney Goldin, Seiden had been the local agent for Powers Cinephone sound trucks. But when he moved into RLA, he seems to have installed a sound-on-disc system instead of the more sophisticated Cinephone process.<sup>108</sup> Whatever apparatus Jess Smith had installed was apparently long gone by the time Seiden showed up:

I rented a small scenic studio on East 38th Street, and hung monk's cloth curtains around the walls for sound proofing. I rented some phonograph recording equipment and a few old Kliegl incandescent stage lights. . . . I engaged Sidney Goldin, a director of silent films and, grinding the camera myself, proceeded to produce the first Yiddish talkie *Style and Class*, starring Goldie Eisenman and Marty Baratz. Talkies in those days weren't shot in elaborate setups. Even the larger companies shot a complete sequence in one set with a continuous ten minute run on a 16 inch disk at 33 1/3 revolutions per minute. Two cameras located inside a sound-proof camera booth on wheels shot the action through a double layer of plate glass. . . . One take, with or without mistakes, was "IT."<sup>109</sup>

With his partners Sidney Goldin and theater owner Morris Goldman, Seiden's Judea Pictures Corporation produced at least twenty short Yiddish talkies at RLA by the end of 1931, as well as two features, *Mayne Yidishe Mame* with Mae Simon, and *Eybike Naronim* (Eternal Fools), said to be the first Yiddish film produced with an optical soundtrack.<sup>110</sup>

Joseph Seiden essentially created the Yiddish talkie at the RLA studios, but not everyone was impressed. There was never enough time or money spent on these films, and the result was obvious on screen. "Our first two shorts budgeted at \$3,000 and were brought home in one day's shooting," Seiden admitted. "Arithmetic was simple. We produced our films, paid out our \$3,000 and our budget was balanced. We had our headaches before shooting time. If we cut corners here,



bargained there, eliminated this, begged off that, our shooting itself would keep everything within budget.”<sup>111</sup> Eric Goldman, reviewing a surviving fragment of Seiden’s *Oy Doctor*; starring Menashe Skulnick, describes a static camera setup and a single, ten-minute take: “When Skulnick made a mistake, it was captured on sound film for posterity.”<sup>112</sup> Of course, this style of presentation had also been followed by MGM in its Movietone shorts (except for leaving in the mistakes), but those films had been made two or three years before. Seen in competition with Eddie Cantor’s Paramount shorts, Skulnick’s energetic performance was sadly diminished.

Eventually the low quality of these films (and the potential harm to their theatrical income) impelled the Yiddish Actors’ Union to prohibit its members from appearing in any Yiddish films—meaning Seiden’s Yiddish films.<sup>113</sup> Seiden temporarily ceased production, but with new backers Goldin directed a feature on his own, *Zayn Vaybs Lubovnik* (His Wife’s Lover). Shot at the RLA studios in July 1931, this Yiddish version of Ferenc Molnar’s *The Guardsman* featured Second Avenue favorite Ludwig Satz and was promoted as “the first Jewish musical comedy talking picture.”<sup>114</sup> A reputed \$20,000 budget allowed the luxury of a nine-day shooting schedule. Nevertheless, the potential market for any Yiddish film was still quite limited, and the producer, High Art Pictures Corporation, never made the subsequent films it had announced.<sup>115</sup> In 1932 RLA changed hands again and emerged as the Standard Sound Recording Studio, now controlled by J. Miner and Hazard Reeves (its mailing address shifted next door to 216 East 38th Street).<sup>116</sup>

Yiddish cinema, unlike the films produced by Italian Americans, continued to flourish throughout the 1930s, if only because there was no significant European competition with which to contend (the Yiddish films that began arriving from Poland in the mid-1930s were often produced by New Yorkers like Joseph Green who went looking for locations more authentic than the Catskills). But even if the early Yiddish cinema was economically successful, it would not really come of age until the genre was embraced by men like Maurice Schwartz and Edgar G. Ulmer after 1932. Unlike the pioneer producers, whose begging, bargaining, and corner-cutting completely dominated their operations, these were serious artists drawing on the finest traditions of New York’s Yiddish theater and clever enough to make the most of their reduced production circumstances. Until the dawn of this “golden age” of Yiddish cinema later in the decade, it was the production of race films that first signaled the cultural significance of New York’s independent ethnic cinema.<sup>117</sup>

Independent race film production in the silent era had filled an obvious vacuum: mainstream producers ignored the African American audience, avoided racially inflected situations, and resisted employing black actors as anything other than extras or bit players.<sup>118</sup> But sound arrived just as American popular music was beginning to embrace a wide range of black musical styles. Jazz, blues, and even traditional

spirituals flooded nightclubs and concert halls; *Blackbirds* and *Show Boat* changed the look and sound of Broadway. Although much of this music was covered by white bands and performers, large numbers of “authentic” black musicians began to build a crossover following for the first time. Al Jolson’s blackface routines in *A Plantation Act* and *The Jazz Singer* (the latter filmed in Hollywood in 1927) were among the most popular of the early sound films, but audiences related to them as much for their nostalgic value as their musical interest. The cutting edge was elsewhere, and it was the short musical film that would provide the ideal vehicle for transferring this most commercial aspect of Harlem Renaissance culture to a mass audience.

“The Negro is exceptionally adapted to the sound screen,” wrote Dorothy Manners in the fan magazine *Motion Picture Classic* in 1929. “The humorous drawls, the pungent philosophies, the rich gift of music and of dance makes this race a boon to the singies and talkies.”<sup>119</sup> Robert Benchley went even further in an essay written for the National Urban League, identifying “the best actor that the talking movies have produced” as Stepin Fetchit. “It may be that talking-movies must be participated in exclusively by Negroes,” he wrote, because “[t]here is a quality in the Negro voice, an ease in its delivery and a sense of timing in reading the lines, which make it the ideal medium for the talking picture.”<sup>120</sup> The 1929 Hollywood features *Hearts in Dixie* and *Hallelujah!* gained considerable critical attention, but their relative commercial failure persuaded most studios to avoid stories featuring African American performers. Black musicians and (to a lesser degree) comedians continued to appear on-screen, but with few exceptions found themselves shunted off to the short-film ghetto.

Much of this work would be done in the New York studios of Warner Bros. and Paramount, with their easy access to Harlem nightspots and the black vaudeville circuit. Even before leaving its temporary quarters at the Manhattan Opera House, the Warner’s Vitaphone unit made two shorts with Noble Sissle and Eubie Blake (who had already appeared for De Forest Phonofilm in 1923) and one with the Utica Jubilee Singers. Fox-Case Movietone countered with the Kentucky Jubilee Choir a few months later. George Dewey Washington, “the Golden Voiced Son of the South,” made a whole series of Metro Movietone Acts in 1928 and 1929. F. E. Miller and Aubrey Lyles filmed their vaudeville routines for both Metro Movietone and Warners Vitaphone; Jules Bledsoe and Mamie Smith made one-reelers for Columbia at the Victor Recording Studio in Camden; and at RKO, Bessie Smith and Duke Ellington starred in Dudley Murphy’s classic essays on blues and jazz.<sup>121</sup>

“Negro sketches, which were almost an unknown quantity before this talking picture business, are now finding more and more spots on Eastern [production] programs,” the *Film Daily* reported in the summer of 1929.<sup>122</sup> Of course, with so much black talent appearing in mainstream releases (and under contract to major studios), there was little rationale for the independent production of race movies in

the early years of sound. The first attempt seems to have been a series of six short films produced in the spring of 1929 by RLA Talking Pictures Corporation and Lou Goldberg Productions, shot at the RLA studio on East 38th Street. Jess Smith, the president, treasurer, and general manager of RLA, directed Mamie Smith in *Washboard Blues*, Ralph Cooper and the Cooperettes in Irving Miller's *Harlem Revue*, and four other titles.<sup>123</sup>

Another new producer, Paragon Pictures, announced the opening of its Jamaica studio, "owned and operated entirely by colored interests," in January 1931. A year later Paragon still claimed to be producing three all-black features and six short "Negro Chants," starring race movie favorites Lawrence Chenault, Thomas Moseley, and Inez Clough. But as with the RLA-Goldberg operation, it is not clear that these films were ever released, or even completed.<sup>124</sup> The independent production of race films in the talkie era was proving to be no easier than it had been during silent days, and once again it was Oscar Micheaux who would emerge to dominate the field.

### Micheaux Talks

Oscar Micheaux added sound to his already completed silent production *A Daughter of the Congo* early in 1930, creating the sort of "part-talkie" that had already served as an introduction to the new medium for most of the mainstream studios. The sound was apparently limited to "a snappy scene of singing and tap-dancing [that] has no direct connection with the story." Micheaux shamelessly promoted the result as an "all-talking, all-singing, all-dancing" production.<sup>125</sup> Rebounding from his 1928 bankruptcy, he organized the Micheaux Film Corporation in 1931 with himself as president and Harlem theater owners Frank Schiffman and Leo Brecher as vice president and treasurer. In January he began filming *The Exile* at the Metropolitan studio in Fort Lee, a film he later advertised (correctly) as "the first all-Negro talking feature production." With an eye on Hollywood's recent black-cast productions, *Hallelujah!* and *Hearts in Dixie*, the producers announced that the new film, Micheaux's "first offering of a picture to the general public," would be no mere race movie. *The Exile* was designed for crossover appeal and a Broadway premiere, the same strategy Brecher had employed with the Italian-language film, *I Pagliacci*.<sup>126</sup> As with Joseph Seiden's Judea Pictures, Micheaux realized that only direct partnership with theater interests (the equivalent of Hollywood's vertical integration of production, distribution, and exhibition) could guarantee a profitable return.

*The Exile* was a remake of Micheaux's first film, *The Homesteader* (filmed in the Midwest in 1919), and contrasted black life in northern cities with the vision of a "return to the soil" on the Great Plains. The prospect of interracial romance



Poster art for Oscar Micheaux's *The Exile* (1931), the first feature-length, all-talking race movie. The Carson Collection.

provided a dramatic anchor for Micheaux's political and economic arguments. Although clearly a low-budget film, *The Exile* was professionally produced at the Metropolitan studio soon after the Mormon feature *Corianton* vacated the stages.<sup>127</sup> Micheaux employed a union crew, and the film was photographed by Lester Lang, who would work on many subsequent Micheaux films, and Walter Streng, president of Cinematographer's Local 644 and recently Dudley Murphy's cameraman on *St. Louis Blues*.<sup>128</sup>

Although some later critics have described *The Exile* as "a disaster,"<sup>129</sup> its technical quality is certainly no worse than what can be found in *Mother's Boy*, *Howdy Broadway*, or other low-budget eastern productions of the period. Indeed, Micheaux's sober analysis of racial distinction within and without the black community marks *The Exile* as far more ambitious and interesting than most other independent films of the day. *The Exile* was a highly personal statement that Micheaux dramatized as stock melodrama, a very difficult project to pull off in the 1930s. If the film was the critical and commercial failure some historians suggest, then its fate might be seen as prefiguring the negative response to D. W. Griffith's *The Struggle*, shot in the Bronx a few months later.

Micheaux returned to the Metropolitan studio the following year, filming studio interiors for *Ten Minutes to Live* and "retakes" on *Veiled Aristocrats* in January 1932.<sup>130</sup> He had shot parts of *Veiled Aristocrats* at 55 Greenwood Avenue, his mother-in-law's home in Montclair, New Jersey, the previous summer. Lorenzo Tucker, whom

Micheaux publicized as “the Colored Valentino,” worked in all his early talkies.<sup>131</sup> To biographer Richard Grupenhoff, Tucker characterized Michaeux as a director who would cut every possible corner, failing to allow his actors adequate rehearsal, refusing retakes of flubbed dialogue, and often mixing professional performers with amateurs. Micheaux survived in the race movie business because, unlike the competition, he knew exactly how much he could recoup on any picture; he had contempt for rivals who wasted their resources on retakes or lighting equipment. Tucker remembered that Micheaux “rarely used electric lights” unless working in a studio. “Kodak would send a camera and crew with a couple of spots or something like that, and he might use one or two of them now and then, but mostly he used natural light.”<sup>132</sup> As in the silent days, Micheaux depended on the use of reflectors to illuminate his actors, even when they were working inside homes and apartments. According to Tucker, Micheaux would direct such scenes “while lying on a couch and swallowing handfuls of raw starch from an Argo box,” self-medication designed to sooth his chronic stomachaches.<sup>133</sup>

Extreme examples of this use of natural lighting for interiors can be seen in *The Girl from Chicago*, which seems to have been made at or around the time Micheaux was sued for misappropriation of funds by Frank Schiffman, his partner in the Micheaux Pictures Corporation.<sup>134</sup> The technical style of the film mirrors its precarious production circumstances. The first half, supposedly taking place in Mississippi, appears to have been shot in the same suburban New Jersey location as *Veiled Aristocrats*. Interiors appear to be lit by reflectors “bouncing” sunlight in from out of doors. (“He could light a whole apartment with reflectors that would bring the natural light in and bend it around here and bend it in there,” Tucker remembered. “He had the technique down and we paid no attention to it.”)<sup>135</sup> At times this light plays across the faces of the actors as if a child were trying to distract them with a hand mirror. There are several lengthy musical sequences featuring Minta Cato accompanying herself on the piano, all photographed in long takes from a fixed camera position; the presence of available light from an adjacent window appears to have dictated the staging. Inadequate fill lighting on exteriors often makes the actors hard to recognize. The general effect is completely amateurish; indeed, this is the only Micheaux talkie whose photography is credited to a non-union (non-professional?) cameraman, one Sam Orleans. By this time, rudimentary sound film equipment was generally available on the independent market from suppliers like Joseph Seiden’s Artone Sound Products, Inc. On the other hand, the training and infrastructure to make the best use of this equipment was harder to come by and would soon drive producers like Micheaux back into more formal studio settings.

The photographic style of *The Girl from Chicago* changes dramatically in the second part of the film, shot at “The Micheaux Studio.” Micheaux wastes no time

on technical niceties. In an astonishing moment quoted by nearly every modern commentator, he can be heard off-screen prompting an actor with the line, "Well, you've got to give it to her." The actor, Carl Mahon, then repeats the line with somewhat less conviction.<sup>136</sup> The editing style of the film is equally casual, with brief inserts and carelessly matched reaction shots that look back to the narrative freedom of the silent cinema.

Such technical eccentricities have led some critics to describe *The Girl from Chicago*—and by extension, Micheaux's entire body of work—as a conscious attempt to create a new, separate cinema distinct from the Hollywood model. For J. Ronald Green, "his films are comparable in style to the painting and sculpture of the great 'outsider' or 'self-taught' artists of his era," including Grandma Moses and Horace Pippin.<sup>137</sup> J. Hoberman finds that "Micheaux's distancing evokes Brecht, his continuity surpasses Resnais. . . . Scenes climax in a cubist explosion of herky-jerky jump cuts . . . narrative strategies beggar one's imagination."<sup>138</sup>

Although examples of such modernist (or outsider) effects do occur in other Micheaux talkies, few of them are as completely transgressive as *The Girl from Chicago*, perhaps Micheaux's most economically marginal surviving production. More typical of his work is the quotidian B-movie style of *The Exile* or *Lem Hawkins' Confession* (1935), films whose themes of racial injustice seem far closer to Micheaux's real concerns. What is especially significant about *The Girl from Chicago* is Micheaux's ability to survive not only his limitations but also his competition.

At first, Micheaux's local rivals had no more luck than they had during the silent era. RLA-Goldberg and Paragon may never have released any of the films they announced. In the spring of 1932 two more producers shot all-black features in New Jersey, but neither company lasted more than a year. Jack Goldberg and Irving Yates formed Lincoln Pictures, Inc. and produced a pair of backstage musicals patterned on earlier Hollywood models. Bill "Bojangles" Robinson and Eubie Blake starred in *Harlem Is Heaven* for Lincoln at the Ideal studio in February, with musical numbers filmed on the stage of Brooklyn's Kenmore Theatre early in March.<sup>139</sup> Lincoln followed with *Scandal*, featuring Lucky Millinder and His Orchestra, but the company seems to have collapsed before releasing the picture, which was generally distributed as *Gig and Saddle*.<sup>140</sup>

More substantial was *The Black King*, produced by Southland Pictures Corporation at the Metropolitan studio in April. Whereas most white-produced race movies were content to package action, music, and comedy, *The Black King* was directly critical of African American culture, taking plot elements from *The Emperor Jones* and grafting them onto incidents from the life of Marcus Garvey. Newsreel clips of Garveyesque parades and street demonstrations were cut in to illustrate the protagonist's fraudulent "United States of Africa" scheme. The film was directed by Bud Pollard and shot by Dal Clawson and Lester Lang, the latter taking a break from



his work with Micheaux. Although Southland used many members of Micheaux's stock company, including A. B. Comethiere and Lorenzo Tucker, the film failed with audiences and the lab was suing for back bills within a week of the premiere.<sup>141</sup>

### Audio-Cinema

Whether in New York or New Jersey, most independent studios were equipped with inferior sound systems promoted by operators like Pat Powers. High-quality recording technology became available to the secondary market only when Audio-Cinema, the first independent Western Electric licensee in the East, opened a small studio at 161 Harris Avenue in Long Island City. As early as September 1929 it was filming Bruce Bairnsfeather's "Old Bill" shorts there, with Charles Coburn, and began work on a "Sheriff Crumpet" series the following March.<sup>142</sup> Joseph Coffman, the president of Audio-Cinema, was a sound engineer who wanted to use his Western Electric license as a way of breaking into production. In March 1930 he directed the first feature-length opera film, the version of *I Pagliacci* mentioned above.<sup>143</sup>

Audio-Cinema produced *I Pagliacci*, although it might have taken over the project from the Golden Stars Film Producing Company, which had announced in September that it would make a series of Italian-language talkies at the former Edison studio in the Bronx.<sup>144</sup> *I Pagliacci* was an expensive film, employing the services of the Roxy Theatre's Leon Leonidoff as ballet master and a reputed cast of 115 people. Eleven months later it enjoyed a gala premiere at the elegant Central Park Theatre, but this risky amalgam of art film and ethnic film appears to have been a financial mistake. Coffman's announced production of *William Tell* was probably never made.<sup>145</sup>

There is some dispute as to where *I Pagliacci* was actually made. Some period sources name the Edison studio, others insist on Audio-Cinema's small studio in Long Island City.<sup>146</sup> What is certain is that Coffman gradually began to move his production operations to the larger studio in the Bronx. In May 1930 he filmed interiors at the Edison studio for *The Viking*, a quasi documentary on arctic seal hunting that Audio-Cinema was backing. Hollywood director George Melford was handling the narrative end of the picture.<sup>147</sup> Unfortunately, producer Varick Frissell was unhappy with the initial documentary material and made a second trip to the Arctic to film scenes of an iceberg calving. Disaster followed. Dynamite carried in the hold of the ship for ice breaking exploded on March 15, 1931, killing Frissell and twenty-six others.<sup>148</sup>

This peculiar film, recently restored by the National Archives of Canada, opens with a title claiming complete authenticity. But the cast list suggests the usual appropriation of exotic locales for entertainment purposes (as in, for example, MGM's

*Trader Horn*). Charles Starrett plays a sailor avoided by other sealers as a jinx because of his connection with a previous disaster. Sure enough, no sooner does he sign on than disaster strikes again—a truly unsettling coincidence, given the fate of the film crew. *The Viking* contains some remarkable outdoor photography and also incorporates direct dialogue recorded on location by Audio's sound crew, a feat even *Trader Horn* had difficulty achieving.<sup>149</sup> Because the crew found it impossible to take a sound truck to the location, they improvised by rebuilding a single-system news-reel camera and transforming it into one of the first portable synchronous sound units.<sup>150</sup> After Frissell's death, a prologue recounting the disaster was also shot by Audio-Cinema at the Edison studio.<sup>151</sup>

In a more successful partnership, Coffman teamed with animators Paul Terry and Frank Moser on the Terrytoons cartoon series, to be distributed by Educational. The films were both animated and scored at the Audio-Cinema studio, first in Long Island City, then in the Bronx.<sup>152</sup> Indeed, by June 1930 Coffman had taken over the Edison studio completely, announcing ambitious plans to remodel the main stage (125 × 96 × 40 feet) and a smaller stage to be used for film scoring.<sup>153</sup> His old studio was eventually taken over by Pathé, which had been filming some of its Audio Revues there ever since the fire.<sup>154</sup> In a bizarre accident that suggests just how crowded the Long Island City studio actually was, Coffman's head cameraman, Al Wilson, was severely injured when he was struck in the head with a knife thrown by actor Roy D'Arcy during the filming of *The Gypsy Code*. The knife then ricocheted off Wilson, cutting his assistant, Paul Rogalli, on the shoulder.<sup>155</sup>

Although Coffman increased the number of recording channels and was rumored to be negotiating a series of features with the Erlanger organization, his first twelve months in the Edison studio produced nothing of consequence.<sup>156</sup> Whatever features were in production in the East that year were not being made in the Bronx. Instead, Audio-Cinema hosted Virginia Moy and Al Halbe's "Sillyette" animated silhouette cartoons; a series of industrial films produced for AT&T; the "Ginsberg and Flannagan" series of "living cartoons," with Fiske O'Hara and Leo Hoyt; and the first episode (only) of Universal's "Shadow Detective" series, *A Burglar to the Rescue*, directed by George Cochrane.<sup>157</sup> Cochrane also directed *Mystery of Life*, a documentary explaining the theory of evolution. The film was compiled from old German Kulturfilm produced by the UFA studio in Berlin, with which Universal had a licensing agreement. A filmed introduction featuring noted Scopes trial attorney Clarence Darrow was also shot by Cochrane in Audio-Cinema's Bronx studio.<sup>158</sup>

William J. Burns, who had once been head of the U.S. Justice Department's Bureau of Investigation, appeared in a series of fifteen "Burns Detective Mysteries" shot at Audio-Cinema in 1930–1931. Burns was usually filmed sitting at a desk, from where he narrates the story of one of his exploits (scenes frequently shot on location,

often at silent film speed). The films, with titles like *Framed* and *The Asbury Park Murder Mystery*, have the careless, offhand quality of a low-budget home movie. They were made by George Clifford Reid for distribution by Educational, and very little publicity was given out about them at the time. Judging from the prevalence of such local intersections as Queens Plaza (*The Suppressed Crime*, 1931), at least some of these were made at Audio's Long Island City studio.

In March 1931 something of greater interest finally emerged from this marginalia. Western Electric was supporting Audio-Cinema as a means of developing new markets for its motion picture technology. With the industry in Hollywood now fully committed to sound, operations like Audio-Cinema were useful in exploring sponsored films, nontheatrical films, and other potential markets. In what might be seen as a precursor of the mixed-media performances of the 1960s, the Theatre Guild incorporated twenty-five minutes of sound film footage into its production of *Miracle at Verdun*, which was directed by Herbert Biberman and designed by Lee Simonson.<sup>159</sup> Projected film footage had been used for many years in both European and American stage productions, but never with this degree of technological integration. Three projectors were used, focused on three different screens, which would appear at the center and sides of the stage (two of the projectors were on turntables). Seventeen speakers, four of them in the auditorium, were intended to produce a "3-D sound" effect. Some of this footage featured the actors in the play; other portions were from stock libraries made available by local newsreels. Eight separate filmed episodes were projected, six of them involving all three screens simultaneously.

*Miracle at Verdun* opened at the Martin Beck Theatre on March 16, 1931, but Broadway, reeling from the effects of the depression, was not flooded with subsequent mixed-media performances. Interest in using film for something other than conventionally packaged narratives was deep-rooted in New York, however, and would remain a characteristic of local filmmaking far into the future. For example, in the summer of 1938 Orson Welles attempted a similar (if less ambitious) integration of film and theater for his Mercury Theatre production of *Too Much Johnson*. Half an hour of introductory material was to provide the back story for William Gillette's farce, but the show closed out of town and never made it to Broadway. Joseph Cotten, Arlene Francis, John Houseman, Marc Blitzstein, and John Berry appeared in the footage, which was shot on 16mm by news cameraman Paul Dunbar. Welles staged chases across city rooftops in Keystone Kops fashion, with Joseph Cotton risking his life as he dangled from building facades in the style of Harold Lloyd.<sup>160</sup> It was, obviously, a sign of things to come. That same year Welles told the National Council of Teachers of English that the theater "is not worth your attention" and was largely "a place to come in out of the rain." In entertainment value, he insisted, "it is vastly inferior to the movies."<sup>161</sup>

**Griffith and *The Struggle***

The depression affected the American motion picture industry in many ways. Some saw this shock to the system as an opportunity for innovation, a chance for independent filmmakers to open new markets by abandoning the well-established conventions of Hollywood cinema. It was at this moment that D. W. Griffith chose to return to the Edison studio in the Bronx. In 1908 he had wrestled a stuffed eagle there in *Rescued from an Eagle's Nest*, his first significant work in the movies. Since then, he had reinvigorated nickelodeon-era production in his work for Biograph, helped put Hollywood on the map with such films as *The Birth of a Nation*, and played a major role in returning feature production to New York when he opened his studio in Mamaroneck. Now, in 1931, Griffith would attempt to pioneer in yet another area. He would abandon the Hollywood production system to film and finance an independent feature in the East. *The Struggle* would prove to be Griffith's most personal film in many years, instantly recognizable as his work in both its strengths and its weaknesses. A critical and commercial disaster, it would also be the last film he ever made.

Although Griffith's previous film, the Civil War biography *Abraham Lincoln*, had been well received by the critics, he had developed such an antipathy toward Hollywood production practice (even the United Artists version) that he broke with his partner, Joseph Schenck, and returned to New York in a final effort to achieve true independence. As he put it to Schenck:

I am determined that the next story I do shall suit me from beginning to end for the reason that all my real successes, from the box office point of view and otherwise, have been made only under such conditions. . . . [I]t is impossible to get good results from a director who has to work trying to please two or three factions. No great book or play was ever written by but one man.<sup>162</sup>

There had been many films about the effects of Prohibition, but most of these simply romanticized the activities of criminal gangs. Griffith, whose principled opposition to Prohibition was clear even in his earliest films, wanted instead to show the effect of the Volstead Act on the fabric of American society, dramatizing his vision, as always, through a focus on the most ordinary citizens. He raised money privately, commissioned a screenplay from John Emerson and Anita Loos, and began preproduction work from his rooms at the Astor Hotel.<sup>163</sup> At first, it seemed that *The Struggle* would be filmed at the Paramount studio in Astoria, which was rumored to be shutting down in the summer of 1931. But when production continued in Astoria, Griffith was forced to shift his film to Audio-Cinema's studio in the Bronx.

Although plagued by his own problems with alcohol, Griffith seems to have been

completely focused during his work on *The Struggle*. "It's the old D.W. come to life again," reported one of the electricians who had worked with him before. "Yes sir, the old boy himself. Haven't seen him like this in years."<sup>164</sup> Griffith auditioned cast and crew with great concern, first announcing Larry Williams as cinematographer, then replacing him with Joseph Ruttenberg ("he liked my tests better," Ruttenberg remembered).<sup>165</sup> Griffith was not opposed to sound films (he had experimented with dialogue in *Dream Street*, years before the rest of the industry), but he did feel that sound was being improperly used in conventional Hollywood features. Wishing to avoid theatrical speeches, he endowed his simple characters with vocal qualities so "natural" they often seem inarticulate. He also wanted actors who were unknown to film audiences and lacked all evidence of Hollywood glamour (in this he succeeded perhaps too well: neither Hal Skelly nor Zita Johann, well-respected Broadway actors, ever had much success in Hollywood). And he wanted to leave the studio as much as possible, incorporating the real world into the fabric of his work. Of course, this vision was part of his original program at Biograph and years later would be central to such radical production styles as Italian neorealism, the French New Wave, and the New American Cinema of the 1960s. But in 1931 Hollywood's "dominant mode of representation" was the only acceptable style for both critics and audiences. Griffith was fighting an uphill battle.

Years later, Ruttenberg remembered the pains Griffith took in photographing a simple dialogue scene at one of the locations:

What he wanted to do was to photograph two people on a fence, a stone wall, and get the whole background in the picture, and they should be in closeup. The camera was only four feet away from them, you had to use a very wide angle lens. . . . So I had to make this shot, which was a very important dramatic scene . . . it didn't come out too bad, but ordinarily we wouldn't do a thing like that. Another director would say "don't do it that way, the hell with the background." But the background was part of the scene.<sup>166</sup>

In another sequence, shot in front of a saloon on a Bronx street, the reflection of an elevated train in the windows adds a degree of photographic realism and suggests the way Jean Renoir or Orson Welles might make a landscape "part of the scene." Remarkably, Griffith was still developing as an artist, moving beyond his pioneering insistence on editing for dramatic effect and investigating such techniques as deep focus and the long take. Few people, in or out of the industry, understood. Lillian Gish took pity on her friend for having been "forced to shoot some scenes outdoors."<sup>167</sup> One first-night critic would single out the photography as "the worst of the year."<sup>168</sup>

Griffith began filming *The Struggle* on July 6, and production had wrapped by



Joseph Ruttenberg (left) and D. W. Griffith (on staircase with megaphone) filming *The Struggle* on location in the Bronx during the summer of 1931. Museum of Modern Art/Film Stills Archive.

the middle of August. The interior settings, intended to capture the reality of a family slipping out of middle-class comfort, were unusually spare. Griffith wanted the audience to notice specific props, like a table lamp, whose significance changes as the family's fortunes decline. Some exteriors were shot at a steel mill in Springdale, Connecticut, others on the streets of the Bronx near the studio. To facilitate sound recording at these locations, Audio-Cinema provided a parabolic microphone that could be pointed at the actors from a distance, an attempt to bend technology to the requirements of a new style of staging. But if production had been smooth enough, postproduction was another matter. Griffith seemed to lose confidence in the film. He refused to show the work print to the crew, instead assembling and reassembling it "almost in a frenzy," according to editor Barney Rogan, who had come over from Paramount to help cut the picture.<sup>169</sup> Griffith had prevaricated over his silent films the same way, but the relative inflexibility of dialogue sequences was a new problem (his first sound film, *Abraham Lincoln*, had been edited without him).

Griffith intended *The Struggle* as an attack on Prohibition and on the meddling "uplifters" responsible for it, the same group he had criticized in *Intolerance*. As Griffith tells it, the arrival of Prohibition ruined the idyllic world he knew in 1911,



characterized by lovers walking slowly through gardens as they discuss the latest films of “the Biograph girl”—that is, Griffith’s films (as a joke, Griffith has one character refer to his old partner as “Mary Packard”). The banning of beer gardens ushers in an age of bootleg liquor, alcoholism, and jazz. Although Griffith depends on the conventions of melodrama to hold his personal stories together, the film contains a great deal of social analysis and observation, far more than had been common in American films since before 1920. Indeed, audiences found this emphasis to be a major problem: first-nighters snickered into their programs as a young family is destroyed by alcoholism.

By the end of the film the hero’s family and its pitiful possessions have been put onto the street, which he himself now wanders in the guise of “a beggin’ bum.” Crazed with drink, the once upstanding father corners his little girl in a disreputable hovel and is preparing to throttle her just as the last-minute rescue crashes through the front door. This style of rescue, with intercutting, under-cranking, and increasingly graphic close-ups, had been a Griffith cliché for twenty years, even an object of parody. The difference this time is that the filthy beast from which the young innocent must be rescued is the hero of the picture.<sup>170</sup>

Audiences were aghast. It is said that Griffith sneaked out of the Rivoli Theatre even before the lights went up, retiring to the Astor Hotel on a binge of his own. Scrambling for quotes for a trade advertisement, United Artists (the company Griffith had founded, which was distributing the film) used the following line from an exhibitor: “I always *said* Griffith would do it! Jeez, what a picture!”<sup>171</sup> Few audiences ever saw this film, but word traveled quickly, and Griffith’s career in motion pictures was over. Nine years later even a supporter like Iris Barry, writing in a tribute volume published by the Museum of Modern Art, found the film “pedestrian and inept today.”<sup>172</sup>

Eventually, as the power of Hollywood’s institutional style began to lose its grip on both critics and audiences, *The Struggle* slowly began to emerge from oblivion. One of the first kind words the film ever received came from Hollywood columnist and press agent Ezra Goodman in the notorious profile of Griffith that opens his 1961 diatribe, *The Fifty-Year Decline and Fall of Hollywood*. “I saw the movie recently and it holds up very well,” Goodman announced:

In spite of its occasional hamminess and bad sentiment, it possesses the virtue of brilliant realism in its settings, dress, and incidental details. A slum in *The Struggle* looks like a slum and not a slum designed by Cedric Gibbons. And most of all, the picture has compassion for its characters. It has a love of life, not a love of the box office.<sup>173</sup>

Goodman’s analysis was eventually picked up by a new generation of historically minded critics who could see beyond the film’s all-too-evident shortcomings. “On

a conventional level, *The Struggle* can be considered a complete failure,” Andrew Sarris wrote in 1965, “and yet the film is clearly the work of a giant, even when the giant is thrashing about inarticulately.”<sup>174</sup>

*The Struggle* opened and closed in December 1931, just as the last Paramount features began to go before the cameras in Astoria. There was still a market for short films, at least at Warners and Paramount, where distribution was assured. And the racial and ethnic market seemed strong. But the infrastructure supporting independent production, like everything else in the industry, was suffering the effects of the depression. At Audio-Cinema, Joseph Coffman’s partnership with Paul Terry and Frank Moser was also coming unglued. Bill Weiss, who worked in Audio-Cinema’s financial office, remembered why. “They made their money in engineering and wasted it in film production,” he told historian Leonard Maltin. “When the sheriff moved in on Audio-Cinema, Terry and Moser moved out.”<sup>175</sup>

Dance director Bobby Connolly shot the "Dusty Shoes" number for *Moonlight and Pretzels* (1933) on the stage of the Casino Theatre, Broadway's largest legitimate playhouse. Museum of the Moving Image.



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# 8

## Independent Alternatives

### RCA versus AT&T

Although nearly all the major American producers had long since committed to AT&T's Western Electric sound system, RCA continued to battle for business along the margins. No one could predict the size of the educational and industrial market, which was still in play, and the production of independent features and shorts was another question mark. Much of this activity was still centered in New York, but with the collapse of Audio-Cinema, Western Electric stood to lose its primary East Coast rental facility. So no sooner had the sheriff chased Joe Coffmann from the old Edison studio in the Bronx than AT&T devised a scheme to manage this business directly.

AT&T had no wish to compete with its own customers by financing or producing motion pictures. Given the current economic situation, however, some voices within the corporation argued for a more aggressive policy. John E. Otterson, an ex-naval officer who had begun working for Western Electric in 1924, was president of Electrical Research Products, Inc. (ERPI), which was charged with exploiting AT&T's nontelephone technologies. Otterson saw AT&T's recent withdrawal from the broadcast industry as a needless surrender to RCA. He did not want the same thing to happen with sound film technology and pressed for the "liquidation" of AT&T's chief rival, once again RCA.<sup>1</sup> As part of this offensive, in June 1931 ERPI organized Educational Talking Pictures Company, Ltd. to take over the Los Angeles studio operations of Educational Pictures and the Christie Film Company (then heavily indebted to ERPI).<sup>2</sup>

A few months later ERPI did the same thing with Audio-Cinema in New York. ERPI was Audio's largest creditor, to the tune of \$224,117.52, and early in 1932 it gained voting control, installed new management, and split Audio's studio operations from its filmmaking arm. On February 5, 1932, ERPI incorporated Eastern Service Studios, Inc. (ESSI) to operate the studio, "salvage" some of its investment (as the Federal Communications Commission put it), and maintain at least one Western Electric facility for the use of independent producers in New York.<sup>3</sup> Ironically, one of the last films produced there under the old Audio-Cinema regime was *A Modern Knight*, a three-reel industrial promoting AT&T's "tele-photograph" system as an aid to foiling kidnappers.<sup>4</sup>

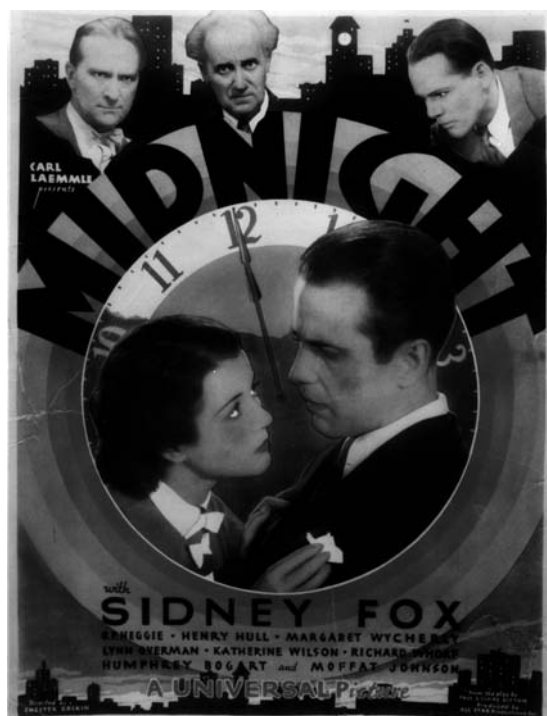
ERPI now had studios on both coasts and prepared to solicit customers who might otherwise have been attracted by an RCA facility. In 1929 it had created the Exhibitors Reliance Corporation to handle deferred payments due Western Electric for theatrical sound installations. Realizing that the financial crisis had been especially hard on independent producers, forcing many to sign with (lower-cost) rivals, ERPI provided Exhibitors Reliance with a revolving fund of \$500,000 in June 1932 to subsidize motion picture production and increased the amount to \$800,000 a year later. Producers paid interest charges of 1 percent a month, but ERPI took no participation in profits.<sup>5</sup> Scripts, budgets, shooting schedules, and key creative personnel all required ERPI's approval, and production, of course, had to take place in an ERPI-licensed facility. Hypothetically, a producer might borrow money from ERPI to make a film, pay ERPI a license to use its apparatus, and/or shoot the picture in an ERPI studio.

In a full-page advertisement in the 1932 *Motion Picture Almanac*, ESSI described itself as the "logical place to make theatrical, commercial, industrial [and] educational subjects. . . . The largest and best-equipped service sound studios east of Hollywood."<sup>6</sup> George Baynes was president of ESSI, and T. Keith Glennan the general manager. By the end of the year Rowland and Brice Productions was making its "Radio Shorts" there for release through Universal. These two-reelers featured such local broadcasting favorites as Morton Downey, Walter Winchell (*I Know Everybody and Everybody's Racket*), and Louis Sobol.<sup>7</sup> Richard Gordon starred in *The Radio Murder Mystery*, a curious short in which he played himself (the star of NBC's current "Sherlock Holmes" series) solving a real mystery.<sup>8</sup>

As conventional bank financing continued to tighten, independent producers came to see the Exhibitors Reliance Corporation as the only game in town. On March 5, 1933, the newly inaugurated administration of Franklin D. Roosevelt closed every bank in the country while examiners scrutinized their financial records. In an age without credit cards, some businesses began bartering their merchandise, and many workers who still had jobs found themselves being paid in scrip. Two months later ESSI saw its first independent feature, *Midnight*, produced by All-Star for release through Universal.<sup>9</sup> Based on a 1930 Theatre Guild flop, this

was the second film of Chester Erskin, who had directed *The Criminal Code* and *The Last Mile* on Broadway.<sup>10</sup> Despite a few weak attempts to inject some visual interest (a character primps before a hallway mirror and is suddenly seen from the other side of the mirror, its frame having become a peculiar vertical mask), *Midnight* is typical canned theater, shot almost entirely on a single set. Critics saw through the strategy. “Not to be outdone in Eisenstein, Clair and Lubitsch camera technique,” wrote William Boehnel, “Mr. Erskin has decided that he, too, is entitled to a share in camera symbolism.”<sup>11</sup> Nominally a murder mystery, its real concerns are the irresponsible antics of the press and a preference for “the spirit of the law,” especially in capital punishment cases.

A few years later *Midnight* was reissued (as *Call It Murder*) because of the sudden prominence of one of its supporting cast members, Humphrey Bogart. Since appearing in the Vitaphone short *Broadway's Like That* in 1930, Bogart had made nine features in Hollywood, all to no effect. He had not had much success back on Broadway, either. According to one biography, Bogart and his wife were living in “a shabby apartment at 434 East Fifty-second Street, near the East River,” and between stage appearances he was earning a few dollars as the house chess player in an amusement arcade.<sup>12</sup> Bogart had just closed in another short run, the Theatre Guild’s revival of *The Mask and the Face*, a connection that possibly helped him land a few days’ work in the film version of *Midnight*. Cast as a suave and not unappealing gangster



Humphrey Bogart has only eighth billing here, but his image dominates the poster art for *Midnight*, released by Universal in 1933.



(a “foreigner” named Garboni), he is shot dead halfway through the picture. As Bogart must have expected, *Midnight* also failed to ignite his career, which continued to languish in New York until he opened in *The Petrified Forest* in January 1935.

The main problem with the old Edison studio was that it was too small for anything larger than industrial films or B movies. In May 1933 Otterson moved ESSI from the Bronx to Astoria and created a new ESSI studio out of the plant that Paramount had vacated fourteen months earlier.<sup>13</sup> Although Paramount had immediately offered the studio for sale, there were, not surprisingly, no serious offers. Unable to rid itself of the white elephant in Astoria, Paramount decided to keep at least a few of the stages busy with the filming of occasional screen tests and musical inserts for features being produced on the West Coast. In the summer of 1932 George Folsey was sent back to Astoria to film isolated musical numbers featuring Cab Calloway, the Vincent Lopez Orchestra, the Boswell Sisters, and the Mills Brothers, which would be dropped into *The Big Broadcast*, a musical whose radio studio setting could justify these episodic appearances.<sup>14</sup> In April 1933 Eddie Sutherland arrived to do the same thing with *International House*, where television provided a similar excuse for Rudy Vallee, Col. Stoopnagle and Budd, Baby Rose Marie, and (once again) Cab Calloway.<sup>15</sup>

When ESSI took over the studio in May, it moved all the clients it had been servicing in the Bronx down to Astoria. Louis Sobol’s *Peeking Tom*, one of the Rowland and Brice Radio Shorts distributed by Universal, was probably the first of that series shot at the new studio.<sup>16</sup> With the enormous Astoria stages now available to them,

Although it had abandoned full-time operation of the Astoria studio in 1932, Paramount soon began sending crews there to film insert sequences featuring local talent. Eddie Sutherland returned in April 1933 to shoot Rudy Vallee’s scenes for *International House*.



Rowland and Brice began production on the first of a series of musical features for release through Universal and Paramount. But just days before the company put *Moonlight and Pretzels* before the camera, Dudley Murphy and Paul Robeson began filming *The Emperor Jones*.

### *The Emperor Jones*

Historians have long admired *The Emperor Jones* as Robeson's "finest screen role" and often cite its production in the East as the reason for this success.<sup>17</sup> It seems clear in retrospect that no Hollywood studio would have cast Paul Robeson, or any other black actor, in so dominant a role. But even beyond the obvious racial issues, Hollywood narratives were so restricted by their own dramatic conventions that it would have been impossible for Paramount or MGM to lick the problem of adapting Eugene O'Neill's stylized narrative to the screen. MGM's *Strange Interlude* (1932), which at least had the benefit of glamorous stars in elegant surroundings, had been a critical and commercial fiasco. A Hollywood version of *The Emperor Jones* would have been even worse: Samuel Goldwyn, the only major producer to express an interest, wanted to cast American baritone Lawrence Tibbett in blackface.<sup>18</sup>

In the end, the film was produced not by Goldwyn, but by John Krimsky and Gifford Cochrane, two wealthy young New Yorkers who had made a great deal of money distributing the controversial German talkie *Maedchen in Uniform* (1931).<sup>19</sup> (Cochrane had less success with another German import, G. W. Pabst's *Die Dreigroschenoper*, whose American premiere he staged in 1933.) Tibbett had sung the role of Jones at the Metropolitan Opera House in Louis Gruenberg's 1933 musical adaptation, a critically acclaimed performance that obviously impressed Sam Goldwyn. Like Goldwyn, Krimsky knew there was a film here, but he could see past Tibbett, back to the original play and the title character's best-known interpreter, Paul Robeson. The play had opened at the Provincetown Playhouse in 1920 with Charles Gilpin in the lead and caused an immediate sensation. Juggling expressionism, psychoanalysis, and repressed racial memory, it also offered the first great black role in American theatrical history. Brutus Jones, the title character, is at the center of every scene, sometimes even alone on stage, holding the audience through a series of intense, highly poetic monologues. When O'Neill replaced Gilpin with Paul Robeson in a 1924 revival ("a young fellow with considerable experience, wonderful presence and voice, full of ambition and a damn fine man personally with real brains"), the role found its ultimate interpreter, and Robeson found himself a theatrical celebrity.<sup>20</sup>

Not long after his initial triumph as Jones, Robeson made his screen debut in Oscar Micheaux's *Body and Soul* (1925), a race movie that for decades remained all but unknown outside the African American community. The move from stage to

screen was already a conventional marker of success for exciting new theatrical talent, but Hollywood had nothing to offer a black leading man. Although he gave Micheaux and his film a fair chance, Robeson quickly realized that the stunted race film market was no place for a man of his talents. An avant-garde feature shot in Switzerland in 1930 was no alternative, either. Given the extreme cultural prejudice of the day, a screen career was so unlikely that Robeson must have long since written off Hollywood completely. Indeed, as a celebrated concert performer and dramatic actor, he would have had little time to waste contemplating the movies. When Krinsky reached him in London early in 1933, he was busy with a West End production of *All God's Chillun*. But Robeson was still emotionally committed to the play that had made him a star and agreed to accept \$15,000 to appear in the film, so long as he would not have to work "south of a line along the Mason-Dixon Line from the Atlantic to the Pacific coasts."<sup>21</sup> This clause in Robeson's contract is even stranger than might appear at first glance. It obviously squelched a plan then under consideration to film location scenes in Florida, or possibly even in Haiti. But by extending the Mason-Dixon Line across the Continental Divide, the agreement also eliminated any possibility of shooting the picture in Hollywood.

If *Midnight* was a typical low-budget production made by inexpensive talent on a few simple sets, *The Emperor Jones* was a far more elaborate proposition. According to ERPI records, Exhibitors Reliance put up \$168,200, about 60 percent of the negative cost.<sup>22</sup> O'Neill received \$30,000 for the rights, and Robeson's \$15,000 was triple the fee Noel Coward would accept to star in *The Scoundrel* at this same studio a year later.<sup>23</sup> In exchange for this cash, Exhibitors Reliance had first call on the producers' share of the proceeds. Most histories of the American film industry insist that such financing developed only during the post-World War II period, when the film industry was in a very different economic position. But beginning in 1933, this arrangement is exactly how ERPI encouraged a constant flow of production at its Eastern Service Studios.

O'Neill had been approached by Dudley Murphy regarding a film version of *The Emperor Jones* as early as 1925. At the time, Murphy had only his work on *Ballet mécanique* to recommend him (and no sound system to capture O'Neill's dialogue or Robeson's delivery), and the suggestion went nowhere.<sup>24</sup> Instead, Murphy moved from avant-garde cinema to a somewhat unconventional career as screenwriter and director in New York and Hollywood. He was prone to giving interviews attacking Hollywood as "full of people, often brilliant, making compromises," and touting his own work on *Ballet mécanique* and a handful of "imaginative" Hollywood features, like *The Sport Parade* (RKO, 1932). In this context, his work on *St. Louis Blues* and *Black and Tan* (both of which he made for RKO in New York in 1929) must be seen as sketches for the as yet unmade film of *The Emperor Jones*. Those films attempted to dramatize African American culture through an ambitious invocation of blues and jazz, straining the short-musical format almost beyond its capabilities. "I like to

do Negro things," Murphy told the press. "You have a chance for mood and fantasy and camera angles. Then, too, the Negro music is always interesting. Here [in *The Emperor Jones*], the tom tom accompaniment will be swell."<sup>25</sup>

Over the next few years Murphy proved relentless in his pursuit of O'Neill and the screen rights to *The Emperor Jones*.<sup>26</sup> While directing *St. Louis Blues* in 1929, he sent O'Neill a four-page treatment of the play and a lengthy note specifically invoking his "experimental" approach to the Bessie Smith musical as an indication of the style he hoped to employ on *The Emperor Jones*. He apparently felt that his enthusiasm for the project was so compelling that O'Neill would be moved to insist on attaching him as director if he ever did sell screen rights to the play. Perhaps he felt that his success in persuading RKO to purchase O'Neill's *Before Breakfast* was enough of a sweetener? In fact, it may well have been Murphy who brought Krimsky and Cochrane into the project and not the other way around. In any case, when the young producers finally succeeded in putting the film together, they hired Murphy to direct it.

The script, which Robeson approved in London in February (and which O'Neill had already accepted), was written by DuBose Heyward, a white specialist in African Americana already famous as the author of *Porgy* and *Mamba's Daughters*. Compared with something like *Midnight*, it is a remarkable example of "opening up" a theatrical text without violating the integrity of the original, and it clearly shows the hand of the more experienced Dudley Murphy. Where O'Neill introduces us to Jones in the palace, his throne already tottering, the first two-thirds of the film version provides the back story, not merely how this one man got to the island, but a capsule history of the entire African American migration from the South to the cities, all underscored with spirituals, jazz, chain gang rhythms, and blues. Taking a cue from O'Neill's text, with its intimations of racial unconscious, the script offers its own archetypal "Negro" imagery, all of which will return to haunt Jones in the final reels. That these vignettes are nearly all negative—crap shooting, knifing, carousing in Harlem buffet flats—would lead Robeson to repudiate the film in later years, although he had nothing but praise for the script while the film was still in production.<sup>27</sup>

*The Emperor Jones* was in many ways a demonstration project intended to validate the notion of independent filmmaking and the potential of working in New York. "The thing I consider important is bringing production here," Murphy told one local reporter. "I want to emphasize that pictures can be made in the East. I particularly wanted to make this picture here because it is so easy to get actors."<sup>28</sup> Beyond Murphy and Robeson, the producers had assembled a remarkable technical crew, drawing largely on talented New Yorkers who had already proven themselves in Hollywood. William de Mille was prominently credited as "supervisor" of the production, but he seems to have had little to do on the film other than assuage the anxiety of ERPI executives regarding the abilities of the production team (he

played a similar role on later ESSI productions).<sup>29</sup> An experienced stage and screen director, de Mille had already made two films at Astoria for Paramount during the silent era. Cinematographer Ernest Haller had shot many films in New York for Paramount and First National during the 1920s; he had since been working for Warner Bros. on the West Coast. After making *The Emperor Jones*, Haller returned to Hollywood, where he won an Oscar for his work on *Gone With the Wind*. Normally, the New York cinematographer's union local would never have allowed someone with a West Coast card to come in and shoot an important feature, but Haller's prior history must have stood him in good stead. The film was designed by Herman Rosse, a theatrical designer noted for the stylized, slightly fantastic settings he created for Florenz Ziegfeld and John Murray Anderson. Rosse had recently returned from Hollywood, where he won an Academy Award for his work on Universal's *King of Jazz*. J. Rosamond Johnson was responsible for the film's complex orchestrations; Murphy had used him in a similar capacity on *St. Louis Blues*. Especially in the opening reels, the film would sample a variety of African American musical genres, not just to provide a series of musical interludes for Robeson, but also as a capsule history of this entire area of American music. Film editor Grant Whytock was imported from the United Artists studio in Hollywood, a sure sign that the distributors (as well as the producers) were taking no chances with local postproduction skills.

When filming began in Astoria on May 25, 1933, local reporters again announced the imminent revival of East Coast production.<sup>30</sup> The basement stages were filled with the two largest sets, Jones's palace and the jungle, both designed by Rosse to support the non-naturalistic flavor of the original play.<sup>31</sup> The palace was decorated with assorted mirrors and baroque scenic elements left behind by Paramount, as if the slimy Cockney trader Mr. Smithers had been pawing through the nearest furniture warehouse in response to the demands of his royal customers (the leftovers also saved a bit in construction costs). The nightmarish jungle was equally stylized—not quite real, but not a forest of paper cutouts, either. Some critics understood. The *New York Sun* called the film “a highly experimental tale that deserves commendation” and praised “the forbidding jungle which was reared in the film studio at Astoria.”<sup>32</sup> On the other hand, for more literal-minded critics, “The jungle, in a word, looks phony. The crocodile appears to be a prop.”<sup>33</sup>

Many viewers were simply confused. Where the play had maintained a consistently expressionist design scheme, the film split in two: obvious stylization in the last part, but a more realistic approach in the earlier scenes invented by Heyward and Murphy. Some of these scenes were even shot on location, at a quarry in New Rochelle for the chain gang episodes, and on a strip of sand at Long Beach, near the Boardwalk Pavilion Hotel, for the moment when Jones washes ashore.<sup>34</sup> Unfortunately, most critics, even today, apparently believe that Haller and Rosse suffered



*In the Jungles of Astoria, L. I.*



*Paul Robeson recorded with microphone and camera in the "shooting" of Eugene O'Neill's "The Emperor Jones" (R)*

A 1933 newspaper cartoon shows Dudley Murphy and Paul Robeson filming *The Emperor Jones* "in the jungles of Astoria." Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

a sudden artistic collapse during the second half of the picture, their skills falling victim to the obsolete technical facilities of the "old Astoria studio."<sup>35</sup>

*The Emperor Jones* remains remarkable on many levels. It was a truly independent production decades before this kind of filmmaking was common, it attempted an ambitious integration of design, text, and music at a time when such stylization was almost never seen in commercial cinema, and it showcased the real power of Paul Robeson's performance. Nevertheless, much of the current academic interest in the film situates it as a kind of race movie, grouped with the films of Oscar Micheaux as well as such objectionable drivel as Bud Pollard's *The Black King*. In fact, black audiences were never a primary target of this costly United Artists release; even Robeson agreed that its makers saw it as "an art film."<sup>36</sup> But neither was there ever any chance to ignore the film's unique status as a racially integrated drama.

During production, the Hays Office in Hollywood reviewed every shot, demanding that Fredi Washington be "blackened up" during her scenes with Robeson, in case audiences thought the star might be romancing a white woman (the retakes of these scenes are remarkably careless, with Washington's face obviously much darker than her back or arms).<sup>37</sup> Smithers's groveling before Jones was another sensitive point:



Robeson could order the white man (Dudley Digges) to light his cigarette, but the ultimate gesture was missing from most prints until a major restoration of the film by the Library of Congress in 2002. This new version also brought back the most notorious set of deletions: three dozen uses of the word “nigger,” nearly all of them spoken by Robeson.<sup>38</sup> In 1934 this word would be forbidden by the new Production Code Administration (PCA); but *The Emperor Jones* was a pre-Code film, and the filmmakers, whether or not they thought it an authentic expression of African American culture, reveled in using it in a variety of contexts, spoken by both black and white actors.<sup>39</sup> Contemporary black audiences were outraged. According to the *Pittsburgh Courier*, “It is bad enough to have ‘nigger’ and ‘darky’ shouted from the stage and screen by white actors, but coming from Negro actors it is abominable. . . . Compared to this picture, the low comedy of Amos ‘n’ Andy is positively flattering and only *The Birth of a Nation* is worse.”<sup>40</sup> Marcus Garvey saw the film as part of “an international conspiracy to disparage and crush . . . Negroes . . . and to impress upon them their inferiority.” Eventually even Robeson turned on the film, attacking the way “[s]cenes were changed around from the proper psychological order of the play.”<sup>41</sup> Heyward’s new material may not have had the artistic or emotional weight of O’Neill’s masterwork (which Robeson retained in his repertoire), but most of the film’s uses of “nigger” did come directly from the original.

Despite all these racial, cultural, and aesthetic pitfalls, *The Emperor Jones* appears to have done reasonably well at the box office, quite a feat in the lean year of 1933. Ten months after its release Exhibitors Reliance Corporation was within a few thousand dollars of recouping its principal and interest, and foreign sales and reissues were still to follow.<sup>42</sup> But if *The Emperor Jones* might be considered a successful independent art film, the picture being shot in the upstairs stages while Robeson and Murphy were busy in the basement would show how an independent production could make some real money.

### Rowland and Brice Productions

Like *The Emperor Jones*, *Moonlight and Pretzels* was produced independently, funded through the Exhibitors Reliance Corporation, and shot at ERPI’s Eastern Service Studio using a mix of East Coast and West Coast talent.<sup>43</sup> The similarities end right there. Monte Brice had been making musical shorts in New York for various producers ever since the arrival of sound. In 1931 he joined with William Rowland and began filming a series of Radio Shorts for Universal, hiring local celebrities like Arthur Tracy and Walter Winchell who were nationally known through broadcasts or recordings but not yet established as viable screen personalities. William Rowland–Monte Brice Productions was incorporated in April 1932.<sup>44</sup> With their short-film business already flourishing thanks to ERPI underwriting, Rowland and

Brice were quick to realize that this same formula could be expanded to include the production of features.

For *Moonlight and Pretzels*, Exhibitors Reliance would supply 60 percent of the financing; Universal, which had been distributing the Rowland and Brice shorts, agreed to provide the rest. But because ERPI's money was essentially a low-interest loan, any significant profits would accrue entirely to Universal, a very sweet deal.<sup>45</sup> Universal president Carl Laemmle sent out his son-in-law Stanley Bergerman to supervise the picture and insisted that Universal director Karl Freund maintain overall creative control. Brice would receive a subsidiary "dialogue director" credit. Recognizable Hollywood names Leo Carrillo and Mary Brian were given top billing; the rest of the cast, including Roger Pryor, Lillian Miles, and Bobby Watson, were still best known on Broadway. Local talent like the Four Eton Boys and Jack Denny and his Waldorf-Astoria Orchestra provided most of the musical entertainment. Freund, who had directed only one film, *The Mummy* (1932), was much better known as the cameraman of *The Last Laugh*, *Variety*, and *Metropolis*. But he had also been a producer for Fox-Europa, and Laemmle had hopes that he might become the next great German director. Freund was also familiar with working conditions in Astoria, having photographed Nancy Carroll there in *Personal Maid* (1931) when Paramount was still running the studio. Although local cameraman William Miller was the official cinematographer, the film's campaign book promised that "the Freund camera touch can be seen throughout the picture."<sup>46</sup>

If Freund and Bergerman were assigned to assure an acceptable level of "Hollywood" style, the crew they had to work with was almost completely local. Where the cameraman, production designer, and film editor of *The Emperor Jones* all had Hollywood credentials, *Moonlight and Pretzels* filled these same posts with local talent. Production designer Walter Keller had worked at Astoria for Paramount during the 1920s and would continue to work at ESSI until the war; during a twenty-year career in Hollywood he later would come to specialize in low-budget features, including the notable Val Lewton series at RKO. Costumes for *Moonlight and Pretzels* were ordered from the largest local supplier, Eaves Costume Company, and designed by Eddie Brymer. Universal executives liked his work so much that they brought him to Hollywood, where he worked on films like *Show Boat* and *My Man Godfrey*.<sup>47</sup>

Universal had not produced a full-scale musical since the costly debacle of *King of Jazz* three years earlier. What the studio wanted from *Moonlight and Pretzels* was not just an inexpensive program picture but an entree to the Broadway costumers, composers, and choreographers needed to compete in this genre. Jay Gorney, recently head of Paramount's music department, was the key. Gorney is credited with "music supervision" and, with his lyricist E. Y. Harburg, composed five songs for the film. The most important, "Dusty Shoes," was clearly intended as a successor to Gorney and Harburg's "Brother, Can You Spare a Dime," which had become something of a national anthem since it was first heard on Broadway in *Americana*.

Other songs were provided by Sammy Fain, Al Siegel, and Herman Hupfeld, each of whom had individual hits to his credit and was asked to produce “more of the same.” For example, Hupfeld’s “I Gotta Get Up and Go to Work” was promoted by Universal as “a sequel” to his previous hit, “Let’s Turn Out the Light and Go to Sleep.”<sup>48</sup> Choreography was by Bobby Connolly, probably the most acclaimed dance director on Broadway, whose recent shows included *Follow Thru*, *Good News*, and several editions of the *Ziegfeld Follies*.<sup>49</sup> He would become almost as famous in Hollywood, where he choreographed such films as *The Wizard of Oz* and *Broadway Melody of 1940*.

To further emphasize the Broadway connection, Connolly shot his numbers on the stage of the Casino Theatre, employing a chorus of “50 of New York’s Most Beautiful Show Girls” recruited from the chorus lines of *Strike Me Pink*, *Take a Chance*, and *Gay Divorce*.<sup>50</sup> Connolly had been dance director of *Melody*, which had closed at the Casino in April; perhaps he was able to make good use of leftover costumes and sets.<sup>51</sup> Universal’s publicity machine took full advantage of the radio associations already developed by Rowland and Brice, and made sure that the film’s songs were heard on more than four hundred CBS and NBC broadcasts before the film even opened, played by everyone from Paul Whiteman and George Olsen to Little Jack Little and the Fox Fur Trappers.<sup>52</sup> This synergy, as such cross-promotion would later be known, was still in its infancy at the time but would become a dominant feature of all the Rowland and Brice musicals.

*Moonlight and Pretzels* went into production at the Eastern Service Studios on May 27, 1933, a moment of tremendous crisis in the American economy. Although clearly designed to tap into the same disaffected mood as *Americana*, the film also offered its audiences a ray of hope, specifically tying its message to the newly inaugurated president’s as yet undefined “new deal.” For example, studio publicity described the “Dusty Shoes” number as “a dramatic cavalcade of American life from 1928 to 1933. The highlights depicted in song and action are the boom year of 1928, the stock market crash of 1929, the depression years of 1930–32 inclusive, the election of Roosevelt and the inspiring leadership of the president since his inauguration with the wheel of industry set in motion by his relying [*sic*] cry of a ‘New Deal’ to the nation.”<sup>53</sup>

Because it was released soon after Warners’ benchmark depression-era musicals, *42nd Street* and *Gold Diggers of 1933*, *Moonlight and Pretzels* has always been seen as an inexpensive clone of these two classics in terms of both substance and style. In fact, the “backstage musical” plot was not original to *42nd Street*, and if Gorney and Harburg’s “Dusty Shoes” recalled the “Remember My Forgotten Man” number from *Gold Diggers of 1933*, their “Brother, Can You Spare a Dime” had covered the same ground even earlier. Bobby Connolly’s use of naughty silhouettes in his choreography of “I Gotta Get Up and Go to Work” was regarded as similarly derivative; but *Moonlight and Pretzels* was already before the cameras by the time *Gold Diggers of*

1933 opened in New York, which makes it more likely that both stagings stem from a common theatrical source. Busby Berkeley, who choreographed the two Warners musicals, was a New York dance director himself and one whose shadow Bobby Connolly would always be chasing. "Bus Berkeley can be proud of his picture disciples," wrote the *Hollywood Reporter* in its review of *Moonlight and Pretzels*, a judgment that has lasted over the years.<sup>54</sup>

Produced at a cost of only \$139,685.23, *Moonlight and Pretzels* would become Universal's most profitable film of the year, returning five times its negative cost (the studio was happy with anything over twice the negative cost).<sup>55</sup> These receipts came from the small towns that were still the backbone of Universal's operation, not the sophisticated urban centers served by Paramount. One satisfied exhibitor, reporting on the success of a later Warners musical, noted that while *Footlight Parade* did well, "it's no *Moonlight and Pretzels*."<sup>56</sup> In Philadelphia, on the other hand, the film was described as an imitative mix of "vulgarity and dullness," its chorus numbers "leering exploitations of flesh." Lillian Miles, the film's bad girl, was attacked for the "particularly offensive . . . thigh-thumping mannerisms" she employed in the "Are You Makin' Any Money" number. Had Universal succeeded only too well in capturing the real flavor of Broadway? "The result suggests that all American pictures should be produced in California," the *Philadelphia Enquirer* sniffed.<sup>57</sup>

*Moonlight and Pretzels* wrapped on June 27 and was already making money in the theaters two months later. (*The Emperor Jones*, which had begun two days earlier, would not be completed until the end of July.) Rowland and Brice were immediately ready with an even more ambitious project, a screen adaptation of *Take a Chance*, a Broadway musical that had starred Ethel Merman and Jack Haley.<sup>58</sup> Cited by Brooks Atkinson as "the rowdiest entertainment of this cautious season" and boasting songs by Richard Whiting, Nacio Herb Brown, Buddy De Sylva, and Vincent Youmans, it seemed the next obvious step for the two producers. Universal sent out James Dunn to star and began promoting the film in its house paper, the *Universal Weekly*.<sup>59</sup> But for reasons that are still unclear, Universal backed out of the project, which was quickly picked up by Paramount. Monte Brice shared director credit with Laurence Schwab, producer of the original show. Hollywood cameraman Joe Valentine was paired with local cinematographer William Steiner. Herman Rosse, who had just finished *Emperor Jones*, was the production designer, and Bobby Connolly again provided the choreography.

Ethel Merman and Jack Haley were replaced by Lillian Roth and James Dunn; only June Knight remained from the original cast. The score was treated with equal flexibility. Merman's showstopper, "Eadie Was a Lady," stayed in, but most of the Vincent Youmans music was replaced by new numbers from Gorney, Harburg, Billy Rose, and various others. "It's Only a Paper Moon" was lifted from another show and also jammed in. Although this song would later be associated with Cliff Edwards (who took the comedy sidekick role here, a part originally played by Sid Silvers), it

is not one of the songs he gets to introduce in *Take a Chance*. Indeed, Connolly's staging of the number is sprawling and formless, ignoring the theatrical potential of the song's witty lyrics. Perhaps his attention was taken up by the show's new ensemble spectacle, "New Deal Rhythm," an obvious successor to the earlier "Dusty Shoes" number. According to the film's press book:

"New Deal Rhythm" particularly shows what can be done with interpretive dancing. The number, which endeavors to explain the increased tempo of American life under the impetus of N.R.A., first presents a beautiful chorus of fifty in a typical pre-depression jazz number. Through trick photography the girls' frilly costumes change into full dress as they dance a "Wall Street High Hat" routine. Again the costumes change and the girls are seen as farmers and workers demanding their rights. The dance ends as, dressed in military uniforms, the chorines beat out the drum-like rhythm of the advance of President Roosevelt's New Deal, and finally spell out N.R.A. across the screen.<sup>60</sup>

This time Rowland and Brice shot all the musical numbers inside the studio, although a location trip to the Charles E. Proctor estate in Great Neck (scene of a "charity gala for homeless dogs") kept the film from feeling completely claustrophobic. Like the musical numbers in *Moonlight and Pretzels*, those in *Take a Chance* looked for inspiration to such raucous Broadway spectacles as the *George White Scandals*. Although the film was produced before Production Code approval was required, Paramount ran into trouble when it tried to reissue the film in 1935. The PCA then insisted on eliminating "Wanda's entire song entitled 'I Got a Lot, a Lot of What I've Got,' and the accompanying strip dance, including the action when she is about to unfasten her brassiere."<sup>61</sup>

*Take a Chance* never had the appeal of its predecessor. It lacked the desperate energy of *Moonlight and Pretzels*, and, as a Paramount release, the modest drawing power of its cast was only too apparent. It would be two years before Rowland and Brice could put together another project. That film, *Sweet Surrender*, would not only end their producing careers but also be the last full-scale musical feature made in New York for more than forty years.<sup>62</sup>

Working with a new producing partner, Jack Schlaifer, William Rowland had reorganized as Broadway Productions, Inc. Monte Brice would direct the new film, which Universal prepared to distribute as "the successor" to *Moonlight and Pretzels*.<sup>63</sup> Even more than their earlier features, *Sweet Surrender* was promoted on the strength of its production in New York. Advertisements prepared by Universal touted the film as "Played on Broadway! Made on Broadway!" offered it "From Broadway Direct to You!" and boasted of its "Famous Radio and Broadway Stars!" Frank Parker, "Radio's Sensational Singing Star" (for his appearances with the A&P Gypsies), was given the lead. Tamara, who had introduced "Smoke Gets in Your Eyes" in Jerome



Kern's *Roberta*, was billed as "the world's most beautiful dancing singer."<sup>64</sup> Larry Ceballos supervised the choreography, and William Miller was again behind the camera.

The plot of *Sweet Surrender* involves little more than a series of promotional plugs decorated by singing and dancing numbers. According to *Variety*, "If commercial pictures, whose negative costs are made possible by advertising sponsor financing, ever come to pass, *Sweet Surrender* may be something of an example of how they'd look."<sup>65</sup> The action begins at the NBC studios, moves to Jack Dempsey's restaurant (where Dempsey himself puts in an appearance), and then transfers to the great French luxury liner *Normandie*, where the passengers are entertained by a fashion parade staged by Sally Milgrim. In Paris, Parker takes the lead in a "Peace Broadcast" from the Eiffel Tower, and Tamara appears in a pair of "modernistic, geometric" ballets staged by Sara Mildred Strauss.

The ballet music was composed by Dana Suesse, a successful songwriter ("You Ought to Be in Pictures") who had studied in Paris. In "The Spirit of the Fountain," Tamara and a female ensemble performed in masks and silver wigs. "The Apassionata" was an orgiastic hymn to the god of love, with 132 male and female dancers writhing before his fifty-foot statue in an enormous hall decorated with "immense, modernistic columns" of obviously phallic potential. The sets for these numbers occupied "an entire sound stage a city block square [and] were built for the Strauss dances at a cost exceeding ten thousand dollars."<sup>66</sup> Whatever the results, these were serious efforts to incorporate large-scale ballet ensembles within the

The skimpy costuming of the Sara Mildred Strauss dancers in *Sweet Surrender*'s "Apassionata" ballet sequence, conventional by Broadway standards, could no longer satisfy film censorship demands after 1933. Museum of the Moving Image.





format of a conventional musical, staged a year before George Balanchine's better-known "Slaughter on Tenth Avenue" for *On Your Toes*. The design of these sets was the responsibility of William Saulter, once head of the Paramount art department. Saulter also built detailed re-creations of stateroom interiors from the *Normandie*, which were decorated with appropriate art deco furniture and an exact copy of "the fittings of the ship's modernistic bar."<sup>67</sup>

With the Production Code Administration now fully operational, the development of *Sweet Surrender* was closely scrutinized by Hollywood censors beginning at the script level. The PCA ordered the elimination of all lyrics from the song "My Gal Is Screwed over Huey" before filming even began; whether the complaints were based on sexual innuendo or reference to Louisiana governor Huey Long (or both) is unclear.<sup>68</sup> On viewing the final print, the PCA focused on the last reel, objecting to "several close-up shots of nude abdomens with exposed navels on several of the dancing girls." In fact, they demanded thirty-three cuts totaling 234 feet of film, which would have reduced this final (1,000-foot) reel to complete incoherence.<sup>69</sup>

The reviews for *Sweet Surrender* were no worse than those for earlier Rowland and Brice musicals, but box-office returns were another matter. Universal records indicate total world revenue of \$141,143.62, an amount equivalent to receipts for the studio's cheapest B Westerns.<sup>70</sup> The film seems not to have been widely distributed, but whether exhibitors were reacting to its lasciviousness, its cosmopolitanism, or something else entirely is impossible to say. A "lost film," *Sweet Surrender* has not been seen in any form since its original release. Universal was only the distributor and no longer has any prints or rights. There are relatively few important (or interesting) films of the talkie era that have completely disappeared, but New York production seems to have suffered disproportionately. Significant losses include Jeanne Eagels in *Jealousy* (Paramount, 1929) and George M. Cohan's appearance in the adaptation of his own *Gambling* (Fox, 1934), but *Sweet Surrender* is potentially the one holding the most surprises.

### **"As Capable an Organization as Can Be Found Anywhere"**

The renovated studio in Astoria attracted other independent producers hoping to take advantage of local talent and ERPI financing, but the results were generally disappointing. In the summer of 1933 Eddie Dowling partnered with ERPI (which put up half of the \$500,000 capitalization) in an attempt to lure Broadway producers to Astoria. "Here we have set up a working organization for the production of films," he told the *New York Times*. "It is as capable an organization as can be found anywhere. A producer can come in here with his play, convert it into a picture and share equally in its profits." The *Times*, with unusually dry wit, referred to this scheme as a "threat to Hollywood's supremacy."<sup>71</sup>

The only producer Dowling could attract was Arthur Hopkins, who began filming *His Double Life* in August for release by Paramount. For his first film Hopkins, one of the great producers of the New York stage, dug out an Arnold Bennett warhorse that Whitman Bennett had already filmed in 1921. Hopkins also directed, with William de Mille on hand for assistance.<sup>72</sup> Lillian Gish agreed to co-star but was billed beneath Roland Young, apparently a more marketable screen personality. (Although it was her only film of the decade, Gish fails to mention it in her autobiography.) The film was well shot by Arthur Edeson on Walter Keller's somewhat claustrophobic sets, but the whimsical tale of a famed British artist who masquerades as a nobody in order to avoid his public attracted little interest at a time when raucous entertainments like *Moonlight and Pretzels* were distracting audiences. *Variety* pegged the film as "extremely nice. But its very niceness is a weakness."<sup>73</sup>

Perhaps inspired by Dowling's operation, another Broadway producer, Max Gordon, signed with ERPI on January 6, 1934. In this case ERPI not only agreed to advance money for a proposed film version of *Dodsworth*, but also invested \$35,000 in Gordon's stage production of the Sinclair Lewis novel. The play eventually proved such a success that Gordon sold the film rights to Sam Goldwyn instead of producing it himself in Astoria.<sup>74</sup> In the larger scheme of things, the loss of this one deal meant nothing. Months before, on September 14, 1933, ERPI president John Otterson had already boasted that "the successful operation of [Eastern Service Studios] has driven practically all the bootleggers out of business, and also the studios licensed by RCA. . . . Through our financing pictures we have gotten a steadily increasing proportion of the business and have left RCA with little or no income from royalties except in connection with studios owned and operated by themselves."<sup>75</sup>

The success of individual films was another matter. *Social Register* was shot in November and December 1933 by Associated Film Productions for release by Columbia. The director was Marshall Neilan, once Hollywood's golden boy, but now an alcoholic whose previous film, *Chloe*, was a bizarre exploitation picture shot in Florida. Neilan worked with William de Mille at his elbow while Mrs. de Mille, Clara Beranger, overhauled the screenplay, an adaptation of the 1928 Anita Loos novel *But Gentlemen Marry Brunettes*. Neilan had persuaded silent star Colleen Moore to work in the film as a personal favor in exchange for a percentage of the profits. Moore was then living in New York with her new husband, a stockbroker, and had essentially abandoned her film career (this would be her next-to-last screen appearance). Years later she remembered that Neilan, notorious for his bad behavior during production, was "more mature and more responsible than at any time in his career. He was earnest in his work and did not waste time." But he still needed to be sobered up before getting on the set each morning.<sup>76</sup>

In 1933 Marshall Neilan, Colleen Moore, and Anita Loos all still typified the Roaring Twenties, a mystique that had been alienating audiences ever since the

Crash. Critics dismissed *Social Register* as trite and old-fashioned. "Direction is generally good," *Variety* admitted, "but there's nothing to direct."<sup>77</sup> The eight-picture distribution deal Columbia had signed with Associated Film Productions evaporated.<sup>78</sup>

To keep the stages full, ESSI often had to accept short-term day work, such as the filming of episodic inserts that would be spliced into feature pictures otherwise produced in Hollywood. For example, in August 1934 Universal shot the Alexander Woolcott sequence of *Gift of Gab* in Astoria, and a year later Otto Brower directed the Paul Whiteman, Ramona, and Phil Baker scenes here for Fox's *Thanks a Million*.<sup>79</sup>

Fortunately, ERPI was still in the business of creative financing, and one of its more imaginative deals was an arrangement with Exito Productions, which had been making feature films with Carlos Gardel for the Spanish-language market. Gardel, a headliner in Paris and Buenos Aires, had created the genre of tango vocals and was starring in a series of features for Paramount International at its Joinville studios. In December 1933 he arrived in New York on a six-month radio contract with WJZ and continued the film series at Astoria.<sup>80</sup> Four films were made at ESSI over the next eighteen months: *Cuesta abajo*, *El tango en Broadway*, *El día me quieras*, and *Tango Bar*. The first two were directed by Louis Gasnier, who had been making the Gardel pictures in Paris; John Reinhardt took over after Gasnier left. Unlike most locally produced foreign-language pictures, the Gardel films were made at the best studio in New York with the best local technicians available, including art director Walter Keller and cameramen George Webber (who shot *Cuesta abajo*) and Bill Miller (who did the others). It was ERPI's money that made this possible.

Although produced for the export market, all four films played in New York and were given generally positive reviews in the *New York Times*. Gardel himself appeared onstage at the Teatro Campoamor, 116th Street and Fifth Avenue, when *Cuesta abajo* opened there on August 10, 1934.<sup>81</sup> Although the films were shot in New York, the city itself was usually suggested through backdrops, inserts, and studio-built exteriors. Even in *El tango en Broadway*, a film in which Gardel stages a tango extravaganza in a Manhattan nightclub, the ESSI cameras rarely left the stages in Astoria; at one point, the colonnaded façade of the studio doubles as the entrance to Gardel's swanky apartment house. But the films were solidly produced, and the technical crews did whatever they could to make them look like real Paramount musicals. They featured original songs by Gardel and his writing partner, Alfredo Le Pera, and background music generally consisted of Paramount standards like "Love in Bloom" and "Cocktails for Two."<sup>82</sup> Exhibitors Reliance Corporation provided Exito with \$333,231 in financing, which the company should have had no trouble recovering.<sup>83</sup> Unfortunately, Gardel died in a plane crash in Medellín, Columbia, on June 24, 1935, and the last two films were released posthumously.<sup>84</sup>

The Gardel films demonstrated that modestly budgeted independent productions needed more than assured financing and distribution contracts to succeed.

They still needed an edge, some special reason to compel audiences to turn out for them instead of the familiar product offered by the established producers. In Exito's case, it was Gardel himself, an exciting young star with an international reputation, whose admirers would support his films and recordings for decades after his death. But what audience was waiting for *His Double Life* or *Social Register*? The same inability to gauge public demand was evident in *Gambling*, shot at ESSI in August and September 1934 by Harold B. Franklin's independent production company.

Franklin was a Fox theater executive who had arranged a Fox release for the picture, the adaptation of a 1929 George M. Cohan melodrama in which Cohan would re-create his original role. Much was made in the press of Cohan's disdain for Hollywood production methods, which he had experienced firsthand during the filming of *The Phantom President* two years earlier. Only the more intimate scale of independent production in Astoria, it was said, could lure him back. "On the *Gambling* set at Eastern Service Studios there is none of the *Once in a Lifetime* tomfoolery," a reporter for the *Times* noted. "A microscopic examination on a gusty afternoon last week revealed no cinema brain trust, no flunkies, no intermediaries, producers, relatives, assistant directors—none of the big business that got in Mr. Cohan's neatly combed silver hair back in 1932."<sup>85</sup> Franklin brought in the clever Rowland V. Lee to direct, but also insisted on importing Jack MacKenzie, a B-level Hollywood cameraman later associated with Monogram Pictures. To satisfy the local unions, MacKenzie was "covered" by Joe Ruttenberg, one of the era's greatest cinematographers.<sup>86</sup>

The fact that the executives preferred MacKenzie to Ruttenberg indicates the

Louis Gasnier directing Carlos Gardel in *Cuesta abajo* (1934), the first of the singer's four Astoria-made productions. Museum of the Moving Image.



depth of the industry's suspicions about the abilities of New York technical crews. After 1932 few important East Coast features would be entrusted to local cameramen, regardless of their actual talents. Editing, production design, and even choreography might be left to New Yorkers, but it was the look of a film that seemed to separate a first-class production from the rest of the field, and only Hollywood-trained craftsmen were judged to have the necessary skills. On the other hand, no amount of Hollywood talent could energize an obsolete crime melodrama (whose problems were only made worse by the recently implemented Hollywood Production Code) or turn the aging George M. Cohan into a romantic lead. "A stodgy adaptation of a definitely dated play directed in obsolete theatrical technique," was the way one local critic described it.<sup>87</sup>

What was worse, the lackluster quality of films like *Midnight* and *Gambling* suggested that the very notion of an independent cinema in New York was fatally flawed. In the theater, the Provincetown Playhouse, for example, had shown that it could produce great work on limited budgets (maybe even because of those limited budgets). But good films seemed to require lots of money and technical resources. For a first-class production like Frank Borzage's *Man's Castle*, Columbia sent a second unit to New York for five weeks in 1933, shooting inserts, reaction shots, and background plates of local scenery. They cut out local filmmakers entirely and treated the city as if it were just one more exotic location. "When the scenes are joined in their proper sequence the illusion is complete," the *Times* reported.<sup>88</sup> Eventually, even the paper of record came to believe that "the [local] filmmaker, in escaping from the stifling influence of the California joss houses, is also likely to lose the lacquered brilliance that distinguishes the work of the Hollywood technician."<sup>89</sup> But the *Times* did see one last chance for local production. Hollywood screenwriters Ben Hecht and Charles MacArthur had abandoned the West Coast with a flourish and established themselves in Astoria. Could the films they were making there succeed where the others had failed? Or had "the boys" simply moved from one joss house to another?

### Hecht and MacArthur Productions

The four films that Ben Hecht and Charles MacArthur wrote, produced, and (largely) directed at Astoria in 1934 and 1935 represented the most significant series of independent features made in the East since D. W. Griffith moved out of Mamaroneck. Two of these films, *Crime without Passion* and *The Scoundrel*, were critical successes in their day and would remain art house favorites for decades to come. They even performed reasonably well at the box office. But the other two, *Once in a Blue Moon* and *Soak the Rich*, were critical and commercial disasters, considered almost unreleasable by Paramount and scorned by many of those who had once



seen the Hecht and MacArthur operation as the harbinger of a new independent cinema. “Was this to be ‘the boys’ art now that they were freed from the dead hands of the Mongolian idiots who ruled Hollywood?” Alfred Hayes lamented in *New Theatre*.<sup>90</sup>

Hecht and MacArthur were two Chicago newspapermen who had formed a highly successful literary partnership in the late 1920s, first on Broadway with *The Front Page* (1928) and *Twentieth Century* (1932), and then, from 1930, as screenwriters-for-hire on a vast number of Hollywood potboilers. Much of this work involved adding bits and pieces to the scenarios of other writers—the sort of “polishing” job held in contempt by East Coast intellectuals. Hecht was the more active of the pair, a dynamo with a flair for writing and selling short, punchy narratives to Hollywood moguls and national magazine editors. Although many ex-newspapermen were already working this market, Hecht’s writing had the advantage of a really stylish cynicism; when coupled with MacArthur’s antic sense of humor, the results were fresh, smart, and relatively commercial.

“The boys,” as they were known to their friends in the press, had an undisguised contempt for the operations of Hollywood. The system was flawed, they believed, because producers had no faith in the scripts they commissioned (which was why high-priced freelancers like Hecht and MacArthur were brought in to rewrite every draft) and because directors committed further violence to the texts as a way of impressing their own personalities on the final work. Hecht estimated that 90 percent of the work he had done in Hollywood had been “mangled,” not so much because of stupidity or incompetence (“although these often figured”), but because “three, five, or nine people having the power to alter a script are certain to distort it and bleed it to death.”<sup>91</sup>

In his biography of MacArthur, Hecht recalled that their agent, Leland Hayward, notified them in the summer of 1934 that “there’s a fellow who wants to give us a million dollars to make movies in Astoria, Long Island.”<sup>92</sup> Hecht’s biographer, William MacAdams, suggests that this mysterious benefactor was George Schaefer, an old friend of Hecht’s who was now running Paramount.<sup>93</sup> The deal would seem in character for Schaefer, who would later be equally generous with Orson Welles when he invited the Mercury Theatre to make movies for RKO. But although Paramount agreed to release the films, most of the money actually came from ERPI, which explains why the films would be made in Astoria. In fact, Paramount announced that it would make nine features at Astoria in 1934–1935, including three Hecht and MacArthur pictures (but the six other films never materialized).<sup>94</sup>

Years later, screenwriters Preston Sturges, John Huston, and Billy Wilder would also be allowed to direct their own scripts and even become their own producers. But Hecht and MacArthur were there first. They were the only writers to be awarded producer-director status right from the start, a mark of tremendous respect on the part of their backers, as well as an unfortunate concession to their inflated egos.



Considering the problems that marked this partnership from the beginning, the team's final batting average was remarkably high. To begin with, "Neither Charlie nor I had ever spent an hour on a movie set," Hecht admitted. "We knew nothing of casts, budgets, schedules, booms, gobos, unions, scenery, cutting, lighting. Worse, we had barely seen a dozen movies in our lives."<sup>95</sup> They were convinced that "the great Secret about Movies" was that 90 percent of any film's success depended upon its script. Producers and directors were annoying interlopers whose job was to ruin perfectly good screenplays. If this were true, it would actually be cheaper and easier to make a good film without such people crowding around. Hecht and MacArthur would wear these hats themselves and depend on a few helpful technicians to flesh out the remaining 10 percent.

They decorated their new offices with a series of banners designed to underscore the high purpose of their project. A formal portrait sent out by Paramount's publicity department shows them in conference beneath a large sign that asks, "What Is the Audience Doing All That Time?" Others were Stakhanovite exhortations ("Better Than Metro Isn't Good Enough") or parodies of conventional wisdom ("When in Doubt Cut to the Chase"). More practically, the new directors' first order of business was to call Howard Hawks, who must not have mangled their scripts for *Scarface* and *The Twentieth Century* all that badly. "When Ben started to make pictures," MacAdams reports Hawks as saying, "when he wanted to direct them, he got me on the phone and said to me, 'For God's sake, will you come back here for a week and help us. We don't know a god damn thing about it.'"<sup>96</sup> Hawks came to New York, "told them what I would do," and then turned around and went home.

Perhaps it was Hawks who recommended they hire Arthur Rosson, one of the best assistant directors in Hollywood, to take charge of business and financial details (the two had just worked together on *Viva Villa!*). More advice came from David O. Selznick, who suggested that the visual side of their films could be handled by Lee Garmes and Slavko Vorkapich. Selznick knew both men from his tenure at Paramount and had even brought Vorkapich with him when he later moved to RKO and MGM. Cinematographer Lee Garmes was not only a great cameraman (he had recently won the Academy Award for his work on *Shanghai Express*), but also an innovative tinkerer who would not be averse to the shortcuts Hecht and MacArthur were proposing. He was one of the first cameramen in Hollywood to have replaced arc lamps with incandescent bulbs, saving a fortune in electric bills; by the end of his career he would become a champion of electronic cinema, another technology he hoped would make both the production and the exhibition of films faster and cheaper.<sup>97</sup> Hecht and MacArthur would turn over so much responsibility to Garmes that he ultimately was awarded screen credit as co-director.

Slavko Vorkapich first came to the attention of the industry when he co-directed *The Life and Death of 9413, a Hollywood Extra* with Robert Florey. The Serbian immigrant had been living in Hollywood since 1921, trying to launch a career as a painter

and becoming increasingly obsessed with “the true nature” of film as a visual medium (much of *Hollywood Extra* had been shot on Vorkapich’s kitchen table). Florey’s interest in “pure cinema” did not survive his move to features, but Vorkapich continued to experiment with his own theory of montage, a behaviorist approach in which audience emotions were directly affected by the content and cutting rhythms of the film image.<sup>98</sup> Vorkapich had already become a specialist in “montage sequences,” episodic inserts that were used to compress time, space, or action for dramatic effect (the Mexican Revolution sequence in *Viva Villa!* the film on which Selznick, Hawks, Hecht, and Arthur Rosson had all just worked, is one example). He had even co-directed a few features for Paramount, usually without credit, and *Variety* reported that he was “going east . . . to handle direction of technical details” for the new Hecht and MacArthur picture.<sup>99</sup> But even if Vorkapich shared their contempt for Hollywood’s business-as-usual approach, his notion of film as a visual art was completely opposed to Hecht and MacArthur’s exaltation of the text. Refusing to allow Vorkapich to get his hands on their script, Hecht and MacArthur assigned him a pair of montage sequences as a way of adding some visual sparkle to their studio-bound production.

*Crime without Passion* opens with the most spectacular of these, a two-minute avant-garde film intended to set the tone for the rest of the picture, like the overture to an especially bloody Italian opera. The film opens with the Paramount logo, the Hecht and MacArthur Productions logo, and the cast list. Then a title card appears: “Beyond man’s dreams lurk the furies—the three sisters of Evil who lie in wait for those who live dangerously and without Gods.” (The sentiment could apply equally to Lee Gentry, the Dostoevskian hero of the picture, or to Hecht and MacArthur themselves.) An eyeball merges with a gun barrel, whose explosion results in a slow-motion crime of passion. From the falling drops of blood rise a trio of harpies, wrapped in fluttering shrouds. They soar above the tops of Manhattan’s skyscrapers and look down on a further series of romantic entanglements, all of which, we assume, will lead to no good. Cackling hideously, they then swoop down on these little vignettes and break a great deal of window glass, much of which reorganizes itself, at the behest of a skeletal hand, into the title of the picture: *Crime without Passion*.<sup>100</sup>

Claude Rains plays Lee Gentry, a disgrace to the legal profession who thinks nothing of falsifying evidence in murder trials. Completely convinced of his ability (and duty) to outfox the unimaginative bureaucrats in the justice system, he also displays his contempt for the “pitiful insects” crawling around on the street far beneath the windows of his skyscraper offices. Gentry is trying to rid himself of his current mistress, a cabaret singer played by Margo, and creates a complicated scenario intended to smooth his exit. The plan goes spectacularly awry, and by the end of the picture Gentry is on his way to the electric chair. Hecht and MacArthur appear in bit parts as two newspapermen flocking around Gentry after his most recent

“miscarriage of justice.” But they really appear in the character of Gentry himself, the attractive superman who lives without gods, far beyond the limited horizons of everyone else in his profession, and whose arrogance and superiority make him an inevitable target of the Furies.

The film went into production on May 21, only a few weeks after the existence of the new company was announced to the press. Garmes and Rosson used every filmmaking shortcut they could think of to stretch the \$180,000 budget, not just to save money, but also to demonstrate the efficiency of independent production compared with the bloated overhead of a Hollywood picture. Of course, one of the easiest ways to save money was to eliminate unnecessary personnel, and for Hecht and MacArthur the director was at the top of the list. “Directing *The Scoundrel and Crime* consisted of putting our scripts on the screen as we had written them,” Hecht remembered. “The actors did what the written stage directions said they should do, and recited our lines with a minimum of coaching.”<sup>101</sup> Although this “coaching” was nominally Hecht and MacArthur’s job, it was hardly as important as having written the picture in the first place, at least the way they saw it. A visiting reporter from *Photoplay* magazine described a desultory exchange between Hecht and MacArthur over one of Claude Rains’s line readings, which ended with both of them going across the street for coffee and leaving Lee Garmes to finish the scene.<sup>102</sup>

The *New York Times*, referring to the pair’s supervision of the picture as “superbly indifferent,” noted that rumors around Broadway had them directing the film “from a recumbent position on the floor while engaged in a heated backgammon debate.” When the paper sent Andre Sennwald to visit the set, he found no

Cinematographer Lee Garmes, co-director of *Crime without Passion* (1933), poses with star Claude Rains and two of the film’s “extras,” Fannie Brice and Helen Hayes. Museum of the Moving Image.



backgammon game, but he saw no sign of Charles MacArthur, either. What he did see was just what everyone else had reported:

“Claude, walk a little more to your right,” said Mr. Garmes. “Mark that, where he comes around the table,” he told one of his assistants, and the man made a chalk outline around Mr. Rains’s shoes as the actor stood rehearsing. “Claude, try your turn. Your hair’s so thick and unruly that it covers your face,” said Mr. Garmes patiently.

Mr. Hecht dragged himself out of his slump and wandered off the set, a crumpled slouch hat perched on the back of his head, the two ends of his bow tie hanging down from his neck.<sup>103</sup>

Garmes, according to his own account, was not only handling the lights and the actors, but even redesigning the sets, which had been built by Broadway designer Albert Johnson without an understanding of motion picture requirements. Garmes ordered that sets like the courtroom be constructed in pieces and never assembled as contiguous spaces, an approach that is very apparent in the finished film. “We had to add a night-club scene,” Garmes told Charles Higham. “We had run out of money, as the scene hadn’t been budgeted for, so I created the whole thing out of a few drapes and bits of cellophane, a couple of chairs and a table, and a little tiny stage. It cost exactly twenty dollars to create.”<sup>104</sup> By racing through production in this fashion, the team actually completed the film one day under its twenty-nine-day shooting schedule.<sup>105</sup> The irony is that scenes like this could have been shot in any little studio; they hardly needed the cavernous stages at ESSI. Although the look of the film was praised on release, sequences like these helped to convince critics that the film had succeeded despite the “cramped” conditions out in Astoria.

*Crime without Passion* received more critical attention than any East Coast production since *Applause*. Richard Watts Jr. saw it as a triumph of individual imagination over Hollywood’s dependence on the assembly line:

Here was a picture conceived, written, cast and directed by two men of intelligence, imagination and ideas, who were responsible for all its phases. Instead of being a makeshift job, wherein the blame could be shifted among several dozen writers, a director, a supervisor, a film cutter and numerous incidental bureaucrats, it was a work in which praise and condemnation could be localized. There was no division of responsibility, but rather a completely integrated production, which seemed to bring a planned economy to the motion picture. Thereupon it became a film with a point of view and a sense of individuality.<sup>106</sup>

If Watts seems to be auditioning for a position as Hecht and MacArthur's publicist, in the final analysis his review is generally negative. He sees this concentration of authority as resulting in little more than "a self-conscious stunt, without feeling or dramatic warmth." Over at *Variety* there was no equivocation regarding Hecht and MacArthur's accomplishment. "They show themselves to be adept in all the major departments of picture making, and this one should drum up a lot of interest in their follow-up efforts. It's also a boost for eastern producing, showing that geography can have little to do with quality and results in filmmaking."<sup>107</sup>

By the time these reviews appeared, Hecht and MacArthur were already shooting their second film, a vehicle for the whimsical Broadway clown Jimmy Savo. *Once in a Blue Moon* looked at the Russian Revolution from the point of view of a traveling circus: the aristocracy was foolish, glamorous, and essentially harmless. The Reds were rough-hewn and pedantic, no more in touch with the Russian population than their antagonists. Unwittingly, Savo helps a family of aristocrats escape the revolution by taking them into his traveling show; he has fallen in love with one of the daughters (played by Hecht's own daughter, Edwina Armstrong). In the Chaplinesque finale, Savo guides the refugees to safety in Paris, but withdraws from their lives after realizing the difference in their social status.

An entire month was spent on location in and around Tuxedo, New York (conveniently close to the producers' homes in Nyack), with an idyllic version of the Russian countryside re-created on the estate of J. P. Morgan's sister Mrs. Morgan Hamilton.<sup>108</sup> One hundred and fifty extras had been recruited through the Russian-language press, and another 450 shipped in from the Gould Mission and the Happy Valley Farm in Ramona.<sup>109</sup> The \$350,000 budget was nearly double that of *Crime without Passion*, which made it the most expensive film shot in New York in years.

Lee Garmes continued as cameraman and "associate director," but Vorkapich was gone, replaced by another unlikely recruit, composer George Antheil. Best known for his *Ballet mécanique* (an avant-garde accompaniment for the 1924 Dudley Murphy-Fernand Léger film), Antheil was the self-styled "bad boy of modern music," now trying his hand as a film composer. Antheil's score was 416 pages long and ran almost continuously throughout the picture. It was essentially an orchestration of seven different themes, one each for Savo, Savo's horse, Savo's circus wagon, the aristocrats, the revolutionaries, and the children, with a love theme added for good measure.<sup>110</sup> In Europe, Dimitri Shostakovich, Jacques Ibert, and a handful of other leading composers had already begun to write music for the talkies; Antheil's score was probably the first attempt to accomplish something similar in America. But because of the film's nightmarish marketing and release problems, the music for *Once in a Blue Moon* is no better remembered today than anything else about the picture.<sup>111</sup>

*Once in a Blue Moon* seems to have been intended by Hecht and MacArthur as something for the children's market, suddenly popular since the rise of Shirley

Temple and the tightening of Hollywood's Production Code. As such, it should have been released in time for Christmas 1934. Savo experiences the world and its catastrophes with a childlike innocence and is associated with children and animals throughout the picture. But Savo's theatrical persona is an acquired taste: this aging clown is no Shirley Temple, and the pathos he wallows in suggests the worst of Harry Langdon rather than the best of Charlie Chaplin. Years later, Hecht insisted that *Once in a Blue Moon* failed because the script was "a dud."<sup>112</sup> But the script is not the real problem here. What this ambitious panorama lacked was another set of eyes, a producer or director who might have steered the project away from the self-indulgent pitfalls it keeps driving into.

William MacAdams recounts a story in which Hecht and MacArthur are asked to meet with a financier sent over to the studio by Adolph Zukor. After keeping the man waiting for hours, they take him into a screening room to show him "one of the funniest scenes ever filmed," a shot of Savo stepping over a windowsill and climbing into a room. They run this scene over and over and over, laughing hysterically, until the money man storms out in disgust.<sup>113</sup> Of course, this is just one of many anecdotes illustrating Hecht and MacArthur's contempt for producers and studio executives during their days at Astoria. On the other hand, it could also be true that they did think this was the funniest scene ever filmed. There was no one around to tell them otherwise. The day before filming began on *Crime without Passion*, Hecht and MacArthur hired a "Negro pinhead" from the sideshow at Coney Island, installed him in Adolph Zukor's old office, and introduced him to visitors as their "executive producer."<sup>114</sup> When George Antheil first arrived at the studio to negotiate his salary, Hecht insisted that all decisions on money matters were made by the man in the next room:

I advanced to the desk, where a little pinhead gentleman in a high wing-collar was writing. He did not even look up. I looked at what he was writing. He was doodling. He looked up, then jumped right over the desk at me! He always jumped right over the desk at visitors, jabbering incoherently. Otherwise he was harmless.<sup>115</sup>

Hecht and MacArthur loved these elaborately theatrical gags, which suggested their artistic and intellectual superiority to Hollywood and everyone in it. But instead of trying to live like their alter ego Lee Gentry, they would have done better to spend more of their time on the set. *Vogue* sent Marya Mannes out to the studio, and she found that little had changed on this picture.

Half of the time, they seem to be playing backgammon while Lee Garmes, their ace camera man, trains his lens-gun on the but [*sic*] yellow set. Young assistant directors, green skinned and lax, lounge in canvas-backed chairs and



look druggedly at the stage. But the carpenters, the electricians, and the camera men move in an audible frenzy. And the actors do their scenes over and over and over again, like bad but patient scholars.<sup>116</sup>

At first, Paramount refused to release *Once in a Blue Moon*. After sitting on the shelf for a year, it finally began turning up at children's matinees and "third run grind houses." Frank Nugent of the *New York Times* caught up with it in February 1936, after having heard occasional rumors that it was playing "in some little theatre east of Union Square or north of the East Bronx." One theater in Boston was said to have been advertising it as "the world's worst picture," but Nugent suggested that those audiences were being cheated. Despite a score of technical problems, "it is not a blot on the record of Hecht and MacArthur or of independent production. There yet is hope for the cinema to achieve its destiny as an art form while lives the pioneering spirit that produced this curious fantasy for children—and adults."<sup>117</sup>

Both Frank Nugent and Bosley Crowther, who wrote the "official" *Times* review the following December ("It would be inaccurate to call it a revival, misleading to call it a 'premiere' . . ."), noted serious problems with the sound track, a criticism that has dogged the film ever since (even though prints available today seem perfectly audible).<sup>118</sup> Perhaps they were reacting to the butchered fragments of Antheil's musical score. The film seems to have been cut down after the music track had already been mixed, resulting in abrupt leaps into and out of Antheil's score, as if someone were picking up the tone arm of a phonograph and suddenly dropping it down somewhere else. But bad sound was not the reason for this film's failure. As Geoff Brown wrote when the film was revived in London forty years later, "Who really could have enjoyed *Once in a Blue Moon* except the people making it?"<sup>119</sup>

With their most expensive film sitting on the shelf, Hecht and MacArthur quickly shot *The Scoundrel*, another tale of a cynical Manhattan superman. Noel Coward, who happened to be available in New York that winter, plays Anthony Mallare, a composite of Hecht's publisher, Horace Liveright, and his Broadway producer, Jed Harris. Mallare is the center of a thinly disguised circle of literary venom in which Alexander Woollcott and Alice Duer Miller pretty much play themselves, while Lionel Stander stands in for the proletarian poet Maxwell Bodenheim, a previous target of Hecht's pen. An exquisitely cynical creature, Mallare (like Lee Gentry) is in the process of terminating his current romantic entanglement when things suddenly begin to go badly. After his plane disappears in the Bermuda Triangle, Mallare returns as a phantom, trailing seaweed. If his soul is to rest peacefully, he must find at least one person who would mourn his loss, and this search, replete with mystical overtones, takes up the rest of the film.

Coward agreed to play the part for only \$5,000, working day and night on a thirty-day schedule, because he was told he would be acting opposite Charles Mac-

Arthur's wife, Helen Hayes.<sup>120</sup> But the role required a younger actress, and Julie Haydon was cast instead. (Helen Hayes did appear in the film as an extra, as did Fanny Brice, Gertrude Lawrence, and Burgess Meredith; Hecht and MacArthur appear as two bums in a flophouse.) What is remarkable is that Coward agreed to work with Hecht at all. Hecht was responsible for the screenplay of Coward's *Design for Living* (Ernst Lubitsch, 1933), a travesty in which, Hecht boasted, only a single line had been retained.

Hecht and MacArthur refused to believe that the problems with *Once in a Blue Moon* had anything to do with their peculiar system of production. They continued to run their operation as "a two-year party that kept going seven days a week."<sup>121</sup> Frank Nugent visited the set to interview the star on his reason for going into pictures. "I am practically unknown, you know, outside of New York and London. Probably they have never heard of me in the Middle West," Coward explained. Not surprisingly, he also thought *Crime without Passion* was "marvelous" (he said nothing about *Design for Living*). Nugent described Lee Garmes directing the picture while Hecht and MacArthur were more concerned with backgammon marathons.<sup>122</sup> Charles Turner, who later directed many Signal Corps productions at Astoria after the U.S. Army took over the studio, was visiting Julie Haydon on the day the film's dramatic climax was shot. The company was working without meal breaks; trays of food and drink (highballs) were passed around at irregular intervals.

Lee Garmes did virtually all the directing, such as there was. I didn't really hear Hecht and MacArthur give a direction the entire day, certainly not to the players. I think once or twice Hecht looked up and said something extremely brief to Lee Garmes and that was the extent of it. Garmes would set up a shot, light it, and would indicate to Coward or Haydon where he'd want them to move, the timing, and so forth.<sup>123</sup>

Turner took the subway home at two in the morning, leaving the cast and crew still hard at work on the scene.

Hecht, who otherwise referred to his tenure in Astoria as "Amateur Hour," was very clear about the value of Garmes's contribution to these films.<sup>124</sup> "He was not only one of the finest camera artists in Hollywood, but more learned about movie making than anyone I met in movieland," he wrote in his autobiography.

While ridding the set of its wrong nuances of light and shade, Lee also watched the grouping of figures and carried the cutting of the picture in his head. . . . As director of the movie being shot, I was the final word on all matters. But I would sit by silent and full of admiration as Lee and his overalled magicians prepared the set for my "direction." My job seemed to me little more than putting a frame on a finished canvas.<sup>125</sup>

Hecht's unashamed tribute to Garmes is refreshing, but he was only acknowledging what everyone in New York already knew. For *Time* magazine, "The work of cameraman Lee Garmes suggests again, like it did in *Crime without Passion*, that he may be more essential to the success of their experiment than either Mr. Hecht or Mr. MacArthur."<sup>126</sup>

*The Scoundrel* was the second Hecht and MacArthur production to be released, and critics regarded it as a continuation of the acid-tongued deflation of urban decadence begun in *Crime without Passion*. Coward had dealt with this class in his own work, and the sound of "two empty paper bags belaboring one another," as he put it in *Private Lives*, is re-created perfectly in the first few reels of *The Scoundrel*. Although Coward insisted in his interview with Nugent that he had written "not a line" of the script (though he had consulted on it), audiences had a hard time separating Mallare, Coward, and the spiritually empty upper classes of which he had become the chief chronicler. Reviewing the premiere of *The Scoundrel* at Radio City Music Hall, in a column entitled "Upon Being Merely Clever," Andre Sennwald found as much vitriol in the audience as on the screen:

The acid girl in the row behind me when I saw *The Scoundrel* . . . assumed the responsibility for representing the American film public and applied the scal-

Highballs all around for the cast and crew of *The Scoundrel* (1935). Ben Hecht, Charles MacArthur, Lee Garmes, and Noel Coward are lined up in the center. The only woman in the shot, Pat Donohue, was Paramount's most experienced script supervisor. Many of these technicians continued to work in the local film industry for decades, supplying the continuity that links the classical and renaissance periods of New York film history. For example, the man at the left wearing a hat, Saul Midwall, later served as camera operator on *Twelve Angry Men* (1957), *A Face in the Crowd* (1957), *The Hustler* (1961), and other postwar New York features. Museum of the Moving Image.



pel of sarcasm to almost every line in the work. In a deafening stage whisper she disliked Noel Coward, Ben Hecht, Charles MacArthur, and the picture. "Dear Noel" she hissed with laborious insincerity on those frequent occasions when the infamous protagonist of *The Scoundrel* sought to be witty. "Isn't he too clever?" At approximately ten-minute intervals she unloosed that horrible curse that witches of the 1930s brew for their enemies. "Nuts" she said, very clearly. She said it seven times.<sup>127</sup>

Most critics, on the other hand, were dazzled by the verbal pyrotechnics, a non-stop parade of witticisms that won Hecht and MacArthur the Academy Award for Best Original Story, the only Oscar won by an East Coast feature until *On the Waterfront* twenty years later. Despite some audience resistance, the film grossed \$500,000 on a negative cost of \$172,000.<sup>128</sup> It was no *Moonlight and Pretzels*, but was successful enough to take the edge off the failure of *Once in a Blue Moon*. Only those who had bet most heavily on the Astoria experiment complained loudly in print. Among them were the left-wing critics at *New Theatre*, agog at Mallare's redemption through "the voice of God coming out of the ceiling" at the climax of the film. "*The Scoundrel* was *Crime without Passion* without the crime, without passion, with a phoney ending, and with Noel Coward's soprano sarcasm instead of Mr. Rains' bass sarcasm," they grumbled.<sup>129</sup> The boys had worse in store for their erstwhile supporters before the year was out.

Because most of their compensation would have come from profit sharing, Hecht and MacArthur had little to show for their first year's work in Astoria. So even before *The Scoundrel* was released, they signed a lucrative deal with Sam Goldwyn to write a film for Howard Hawks, *Barbary Coast*. After finally earning some real money in Hollywood, they returned to Astoria to finish out their contract, only to find the Furies lying in wait for them. First, Hollywood flexed its muscles when MGM squelched Myrna Loy's efforts to break her contract in order to make a film for them in New York.<sup>130</sup> Then Hecht became infatuated with a socialite and model named Mary Taylor, scrapped the project he and MacArthur were working on, and instead revamped an old playscript he hoped might serve as a vehicle to launch "Mimsi" Taylor to stardom.<sup>131</sup> She would play the socialite daughter of a powerful millionaire, torn between the attractions of upper-class life and a handsome campus agitator protesting her father's opposition to a radical faculty member. *Soak the Rich* is one of the only American films of the 1930s to deal directly with campus radicalism.<sup>132</sup> As with *The Emperor Jones*, which everyone knew Hollywood had neither the interest nor the ability to film properly, the subject seemed ideal for two strong-minded independent producers from New York. Hopes were high, but the final result would be the most conventional of Hecht and MacArthur's Astoria productions and therefore the least successful.

While Hecht and MacArthur had been off working for Sam Goldwyn, much of their New York production unit had scattered. Lee Garmes had gone to work in London. His replacement, Leon Shamroy, was an imaginative visual stylist but lacked Garmes's high level of experience and managerial skill.<sup>133</sup> Arthur Rosson had returned to Hollywood to begin a long association with Cecil B. De Mille. The team's experienced film editor, Arthur Ellis, was replaced by Leo Zochling, a newsreel and documentary veteran with a modest list of theatrical credits, including *Midnight* and *Sweet Surrender*. Assistant director Harold Godsoe was still there, and Walter Keller, who had worked on *The Scoundrel*, again designed the sets. But with no one to tell him otherwise, Keller now filled half the main stage with them, constructing a fully detailed millionaire's mansion with landscaped grounds and a goldfish pond. Visiting reporters were immediately struck by what they described as a move toward "realism." "Generally, one has to guess at the Hecht-MacArthur sets," Frank Nugent wrote. "With fine economy, they will take a desk, a chair and a strip of carpet and pretend it is a sumptuous office of a book publisher—like Noel Coward. But this one was the McCoy."<sup>134</sup>

An even more creative bit of realism could be seen in the protest banners visible throughout the film, which were painted by George Grosz, a friend of Hecht's since his days in Berlin. Grosz painted an entire demonstration's worth of angry placards, as well as the art for the credit sequence (which Paramount's press book described as "really distinguished pieces of modern art").<sup>135</sup> But aside from Grosz's contribution, Hecht and MacArthur were working with conventional settings that provided very little visual interest. Moreover, if their earlier films had taken advantage of some fresh faces better known on Broadway than in Hollywood, *Soak the Rich* lacked any sort of star power. Walter Connolly, Hollywood's favorite millionaire, could never be considered a threat to freedom and democracy (Edward Arnold might have been a more sinister choice). With Connolly as an opponent, the feeble complaints of the student radicals, led by John Howard, a Paramount contract juvenile, seem little more than adolescent agitation.

Frank Nugent of the *New York Times* was invited to the set the day Mary Taylor's big scene was filmed. Kidnapped and tied to a chair by a real anarchist (a terrifying performance from Lionel Stander, himself later a blacklist victim), she attempts to win him over by discussing Marxist ideology. Nugent was obviously unimpressed by Taylor ("you probably haven't heard of her before" was his only comment), but he also noticed a change in atmosphere around the studio. The pinheads and practical jokes were gone, and the boys themselves seemed "reformed," even "chastened." "One legend has it that the vitriolic Hecht tongue was silenced during a Paramount executive conference recently by the admonition to pay less attention to backgammon and more to picture-making. Another report, equally unreliable, is that the frolicking Astorians couldn't stand the pace, found it impossible to be antic all the time."<sup>136</sup> Both stories may have been true, but what Nugent probably did not know



was that Hecht's parents had been hit by a car on Wilshire Boulevard two days after the start of production. His mother died two days later, and his father was brought back to Nyack to recuperate.<sup>137</sup> Hecht fails to mention *Soak the Rich* in his autobiography or in the biography he wrote of Charles MacArthur. The party was over, and in Hecht's memory it was almost as if the film never existed.

The Astoria studio had been busy with other ESSI features while Hecht and MacArthur were making their earlier films, but by the time *Soak the Rich* was shot in October and November 1935, this other business had dried up. Production in New York was depressed again, and the studio's only other tenants were shooting two-reel comedies and big band musicals. The lack of energy and interest showed on screen. "I co-directed it," Leon Shamroy claimed. "They wanted to give me 250 bucks less a week in return for billing as co-director." Shamroy wisely decided to keep the money and avoid the credit.<sup>138</sup>

*Soak the Rich* was released to very bad reviews. The *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* felt it "runs about in circles, never quite deciding whether it will be sympathetic toward its millionaire or its radicals," until suddenly "the moneyed class comes out on top."<sup>139</sup> The *New York Sun* offered an obituary that might have stood for the entire Astoria experiment: "The Messrs. Hecht and MacArthur prove again, in their *Soak the Rich*, that their gift for writing dialogue and situation is perhaps the most brilliant of all the movie scenarists. They prove, too, in this new film, that they have little talent for directing or producing. Both in their choice of cast and in their handling of it they destroy their own handiwork."<sup>140</sup>

Unlike *Once in a Blue Moon*, *Soak the Rich* was given a formal release by Paramount, although exhibitors may have felt the studio need not have bothered. In July the *Hollywood Reporter* published a list of all 221 features released in the first half of 1936, ranked according to box-office performance. *Soak the Rich* came in dead last, having attracted only 43 percent of "normal business," according to exhibitors who ran the film.<sup>141</sup> It seemed a very sad end to the dream of first-class independent production in the East. Hecht and MacArthur quickly folded their operation and returned to Hollywood. On March 5, one month after the release of *Soak the Rich* (and with *Once in a Blue Moon* still playing somewhere north of the East Bronx), they picked up their Oscar for *The Scoundrel*.<sup>142</sup>

### New York's Own Poverty Row

One reason Western Electric had entered the business of operating a studio (and funding the independent producers who worked there) was that it wanted to shut RCA's competing Photophone sound system out of the market. Any film made at ESSI on Western Electric equipment was one less film made on Photophone. By 1933 a similar situation existed in regard to negative stock. A market that had once



been dominated by Eastman Kodak was now seeing real competition from Dupont, which had introduced a much more sensitive negative stock requiring fewer lamps and less electrical power. In the East, most of Kodak's business was handled by Consolidated Film Industries, whose president, Herbert J. Yates, saw this rivalry as an excuse to move into production himself. Because nearly all local independent producers were deeply in debt to the labs that supplied and developed their film, the new role would also allow him to keep an eye on his least creditworthy customers. As one corporate history delicately put it, "Laboratory connections brought Mr. Yates into association with production and picture financing."<sup>143</sup>

The revival of the Astoria studio in 1933 suggested that independent production in New York might have a real future, but only if first-class technical facilities were available. Seeing an opportunity to service this market, cameraman Joseph Ruttenberg joined a group of local technicians in a scheme to rent the old Biograph studio in the Bronx, install modern equipment, and operate it as a fully staffed service studio. But the banks refused to underwrite the project. "We couldn't raise the money, so Yates took over the whole thing; he rebuilt the whole studio, the glass, put in lights, and all the sound equipment and everything else. That was for the Yates company. I think it was called Republic Studios."<sup>144</sup> Yates would not officially form Republic Pictures until 1935, at which point Republic Studios was established in Hollywood. But for most of 1934 the Biograph studio did serve as a prototype of the aggressive, low-budget operation Yates would soon perfect there.<sup>145</sup>

Five features were shot at Biograph that year, although only the first displayed anything like the artistic aspirations of Hecht and MacArthur. The rest were simple B pictures made for the bottom half of the newly popular double-feature market. *Frankie and Johnnie*, directed by Chester Erskin for All Star Productions, was intended as the successor to *Midnight*. "This is a crucial moment for shifting picture production back to New York," Erskin told the *New York Herald Tribune*. He believed that sound film production was forcing all producers to work indoors under artificial lights, eliminating the advantages of California and emphasizing New York's role as a center of talent, finance, and "critical opinion."<sup>146</sup> For the new film Erskin used art director Sam Corso, who had worked on *Midnight*, and cameraman Joe Ruttenberg, who would shoot all but one of the Biograph studio films that year.

John M. Kirkland's theatrical production of *Frankie and Johnnie* had won a certain amount of notoriety in 1930 when it was raided by the police as an immoral and indecent attraction, and it was this version of the popular song that Moss Hart adapted for the screen.<sup>147</sup> Helen Morgan and Chester Morris would play the ill-fated lovers, and the interesting supporting cast included Florence Reed and Lilyan Tashman. Victor Young composed a full orchestral score, as well as a new song for Helen Morgan. Adapting this text may have seemed like a good idea when *Frankie and Johnnie* went into production on February 13, 1934, but the decision eventu-

ally proved fatal, not only to the film, but also to Erskin's career as an independent producer. Ten days after shooting had begun, Harry Goetz (an officer of both All Star and Consolidated Film Industries) received an indignant letter from Vincent Hart of the newly energized Production Code Administration in Hollywood. Hart was startled that work had begun without PCA script approval, and now that he had finally seen the text, he demanded a long list of cuts, from the characterization of a "Lady of Large Bosoms" to the use of words like "slut." Then, five weeks into production, as the company struggled with the PCA demands, co-star Lilyan Tashman died after an emergency operation. Subsequent rewrites would have to dance around the disappearance of what had once obviously been intended as a central character. It was September before a seventy-five-minute cut was ready for review by Production Code administrator Joe Breen, who found the film completely unacceptable. "The whole flavor and atmosphere of the story is such as to suggest its almost complete unfitness for public exhibition before mixed audiences," he wrote in a memo to his files. He demanded that no mention be made of Kirkland's notorious stage play, that all references to the scandalous folk song on which the entire story was based be eliminated, and that absolutely no suggestion that the main locale is a brothel remain in the picture.<sup>148</sup>

Select Productions, which was now handling the film, made these changes (and more) in a series of retakes, some of which were shot in Hollywood in March 1935.<sup>149</sup> The result was a disaster. Although the new version was reviewed by the *Hollywood*

Chester Morris, star of *Frankie and Johnnie*, poses with the Biograph studio crew on September 9, 1934. The man with glasses on the left, cameraman Joseph Ruttenberg, would soon leave New York for MGM. Many of the same grips, carpenters, and electricians visible in the crew shot from *The Scoundrel* (page 294) can also be seen here. Bison Archives.



*Reporter* on May 20, 1935 (as an RKO release), it was another year before *Frankie and Johnnie* was generally released (by Republic), and then only because of Helen Morgan's recent success in Universal's *Show Boat*. "Two years have passed since the picture was filmed in the Bronx," wrote the *New York Times*, "and those two years have seen the censors grow mightily in power and authority. What they have done to the picture is more than we could imagine."<sup>150</sup> Indeed, this may be the only version of the tale in which Johnnie is not shot by Frankie.

Nevertheless, traces of a much better film still remain, notably Florence Reed's performance as the Madame (with more than a hint of Mae West) and some interesting deep staging by Erskin and Ruttenberg in the opening dance hall ensembles.<sup>151</sup> During the initial weeks of production Erskin had described the film as "a sentimental caricature of America's first torch song," but only a hint of this intriguing approach survives in the finished film. Unfortunately, the actions of the Hollywood censors, Lilyan Tashman's death in mid-production, and the decision to focus on Helen Morgan's acting skills instead of her vocal talents all conspired to transform a potentially interesting little musical into what one local reviewer called "A Wasted Opportunity."<sup>152</sup>

In the summer of 1934 Select quickly made three more features at Biograph for release through RKO. Each had a different director, but Joe Ruttenberg was always behind the camera, and William Saulter designed the sets. They featured the same low-end stars who might have been appearing that season for Mascot or Invincible on the West Coast: Fay Wray, Ralph Bellamy, and Melvyn Douglas in *Woman in the Dark* (heavily promoted as deriving from a story by Dashiell Hammett); Adrienne Ames and Ralph Bellamy in *Gigolette*; and Preston Foster and Melvyn Douglas in *The People's Enemy*. "In June, New York without air conditioning was difficult to endure," Fay Wray wrote in her autobiography, her only recollection of *Woman in the Dark*. "We worked at a studio uptown; stuffy, hot; we returned to the Pierre, which with all its beauty couldn't provide a restful night, the heat making it almost unbearable to be covered by a sheet."<sup>153</sup> A *Times* reporter on the set made the same point: "It was hot in the studio; hotter under the lights. . . . Miss Wray was carrying a chamois powder cloth and using it every other minute. . . . Mr. Bellamy's hair was curling in the heat and had to be combed anew before each scene."<sup>154</sup> In the silent days, New York producers would leave town for the summer; with talkies, it was even harder to cool the sets, because the noise of fans or air-conditioning apparatus would be picked up by the microphone. So why did Select produce all these films during the hottest months of the year?

Although the troubles of *Frankie and Johnnie* got more attention, it was really *The Crime of Dr. Crespi* that marked the nadir of Biograph studio production. The film was shot there in September 1934 by Liberty Productions, a tiny Hollywood poverty-row producer that Yates would soon merge into Republic (indeed, release

was held up almost a full year so it could appear on the Republic program). To add some marquee power, Erich von Stroheim was shipped to New York for eight days' work as an actor on this "adaptation" of Edgar Allan Poe's "The Premature Burial."<sup>155</sup> The fact that Poe's middle name is spelled "Allen" in the credits suggests the time and attention that went into the film. Stroheim was at a low point in his career and agreed to appear in the film only because he and his family were completely without funds. At times his performance is low-key, even resigned; at other moments he appears distracted or angry. The general effect is that of a caged animal not happy to be put on public display. Director John Auer appears to have left von Stroheim to his own devices, concentrating instead on inexpensive "horror film" effects, like a burial sequence shot from inside the coffin (Larry Williams, not Joe Ruttenberg, photographed the picture). Even the settings by the usually reliable William Saulter suggest the flimsy painted backdrops of the earliest Biograph films.

After *The Crime of Dr. Crespi*, Yates lost interest in New York production. Bringing together three of Consolidated's more threadbare clients (Mascot, Monogram, and Liberty), he formed Republic Pictures and began making serials and B Westerns in Hollywood.<sup>156</sup> The Biograph studio continued as a subsidiary of Consolidated Film Industries until 1939.<sup>157</sup>

The independent films being made at ESSI and Biograph were able to take advantage of financing and distribution deals offered by the operators of those studios. Even *The Crime of Dr. Crespi* was released nationally by Republic. New York's other rental studios were left with the dregs, features thrown together on spec for the states rights market, where local exhibition rights would be sold to the highest

At a low point in his Hollywood career, Erich von Stroheim starred in *The Crime of Dr. Crespi* at the Biograph studio in September 1934. He poses uneasily here with Dwight Frye, Harriett Russell, director John Auer, Paul Guilfoyle, Geraldine Kay, and John Bohn.



bidder. During the silent era such low-end production activity was seen as a legitimate branch of the industry, but by 1932 these films were being grouped with exploitation films and race movies. Seldom reviewed on release, their very existence was often ignored in annual production surveys. Between 1932 and 1934 only a handful were still being shot in New York, most under the guidance of men like Arthur Hoerl or Bud Pollard.

Hoerl had started as an exhibitor in 1912, and during the 1920s he had been associated with many poverty-row productions in Hollywood. But he was also an occasional dramatist; in March 1932 his latest play, *A Few Wild Oats*, closed on Broadway after four performances. Soon after, Hoerl wrote and “supervised” *Hotel Variety*, a crime melodrama set in a hotel for vaudevillians, which was shot at the Fox-Case Movietone studio in August 1932. Hal Skelly, in his first film since Griffith’s *The Struggle*, starred with silent favorite Olive Borden and the exotic bubble dancer Sally Rand. In September, Hoerl provided a script for *Enlighten Thy Daughter*, produced by Robert Mintz’s Exploitation Pictures at the Photocolor Studio in Hastings-on-Hudson. A remake of an old Ivan Abramson film on the perils of sexual ignorance, it was updated to include considerable musical support from Paul Vincent and His New Yorkers, as well as the stage show at Trini’s, a popular Greenwich Village nightspot.

Hoerl then wrote and directed two films on his own for Trojan Pictures at the Standard Sound Recording Studios, 220 East 38th Street. Joseph Seiden’s old RLA studio was now operated by J. Miner, with Hazard Reeves (later famous for his development of magnetic sound recording systems) as chief sound engineer. Both films involved a familiar mix of racketeers and reporters, differentiated mainly by cast: *Big Town* starred Lester Vail and Frances Dade; *The Shadow Laughs* had Hal Skelly and Rose Hobart. Production values were minimal. In *The Shadow Laughs* actors occasionally stumble through their lines or walk out of microphone range. There is no musical score, and the camera seldom moves. Skelly’s performance is modeled on Lee Tracy’s crime-fighting reporter in films like *Dr. X* (1932), but the material is hardly worth the effort.

In the meantime, Robert Mintz had formed a partnership with Louis Weiss to film direct adaptations of current Broadway productions, taking advantage of the original casts, sets, and costumes as much as possible. Hoerl directed two of these at the Atlas Soundfilm Recording Studios, now located at 28-19 40th Avenue in Long Island City (the old Caravel studio).<sup>158</sup> *Drums o’ Voodoo*, shot in March 1933, was originally a Negro Theatre Guild production written by J. Augustus Smith under the title *Louisiana*. Part race movie, part exploitation picture, it appears to have been rejected by all audiences despite the producers’ hopes of matching the success of the recent low-budget hit *White Zombie*. The second film, *Before Morning*, was shot sometime that summer. It also featured members of the play’s original



Broadway cast, with Leo Carillo added for greater box-office appeal (he was already in town for *Moonlight and Pretzels*). By the time it was released, Hoerl was back in Hollywood, hard at work once more on the original poverty row.

*Beer Is Here!* produced and directed by H. H. Rogers and Harold McCracken, may also have been made at the Atlas studio. Or it may have been made at Standard, Biograph, or Edison; existing evidence is inconclusive. When Prohibition is repealed, legendary vaudevillians Joe Weber and Lew Fields (in their only starring role in a talking feature) decide to reopen their old brewery—and restage many of their classic routines. Perhaps the film's nostalgic humor lacked contemporary appeal. In any case, Standard Motion Pictures, Inc., the nominal distributor of both *Beer Is Here!* and the even more shadowy *Nearly Naked*, seems to have failed to obtain many bookings for either film. Although both were approved for exhibition by the New York State Motion Picture Commission, no reviews were written and no copyrights were registered, suggesting the sort of financial collapse that would plague several other fly-by-night features shot during the grim 1932–1933 season. Independent producers could make their films in New York, but, without access to adequate distribution, there was no guarantee that any audience would ever see them.<sup>159</sup>

If Arthur Hoerl was at least writing and directing entire films, Bud Pollard, already established in the East as a director of low-budget features like *Alice in Wonderland*, was often dealing in mere bits and pieces. Pollard's 1932 output included one race movie, *The Black King*; one Italian-language feature, *O festino o la legge*, shot at the Metropolitan studios; and an obscure exploitation film called *The Horror*. Pollard shot *The Horror* at the Atlas studio in Long Island City in September and October 1932. An uncredited adaptation of Arthur Conan Doyle's *The Sign of Four* (with lengthy hallucinatory sequences making up for the absence of Sherlock Holmes), the film seems to have suffered from the collapse of SP Productions, a partnership Pollard entered into with the Stanley Distributing Corporation. Pollard later cut the film to four reels, added a narration, and released it in 1944 as an anti-alcoholism tract called *John the Drunkard*.<sup>160</sup> Still at Atlas later in 1932, he directed *Missing Daughters*, or at least some newly shot footage for it, which he wrapped around a 1924 silent movie of the same name. He did the same thing with *Forgotten Men*, this time building an entire feature around a few reels of World War I newsreel footage and some scenes of producer Sam Cummins interviewing disgruntled war veterans.<sup>161</sup>

In 1933 Pollard made his strangest film, *Victims of Persecution*, for William Goldberg's Yiddish film company—apparently the only such film ever shot in English.<sup>162</sup> A Jewish jurist becomes a target of racial hatred when he insists on justice for an accused black arsonist. ("Take warning. Don't play God to the Niggers. If he don't hang you will," threatens a note stuck to his front door on a dagger.) The





Bud Pollard's trade advertisement in the 1933 *Motion Picture Almanac*. The films listed here were either never shot or (in the case of *The Horror*) never properly released.

significance of the judge's decision for "our people" is illustrated by footage of Jewish settlements in Palestine, newsreel coverage of a protest against "bigotry and persecution" in Union Square, and one reel of a silent film telling the story of Leah, who sacrificed herself for the Jews (a gesture that turned out badly, in any case). Existing prints bear the title *Intolerance of 1933*, a peculiar construct that appears to invoke both D. W. Griffith and Busby Berkeley. Pollard continued to work in the race film market until well after World War II. His career remains almost entirely unresearched.

In the films of Hoerl and Pollard one can see how the lines of demarcation that the industry had set up between conventional B movies, ethnic and racial pictures, and exploitation films gradually eroded in New York as the effects of the depression bore down on the low end of the local film industry. All such films were now being made by the same group of people in the same handful of studios and with the same recourse to states rights distribution (which was one way of side-stepping the industry's Production Code, if not the censorship statutes of the various states). By 1934, in fact, production of conventional B movies in the East would be eliminated

entirely; their place would be filled by short films, racial and ethnic pictures, and nonfiction production. A few of the studios that had been set up to service the low-end independent market in the early sound years continued for a time even after the brutal winter of 1932, but all of them had a very hard time finding customers.

The Ideal studio in Hudson Heights, for example, had enjoyed a spell of unexpected prosperity after the Pathé fire closed many of the smaller New York stages. Nat Shilkret's children's operetta, *Puss in Boots*, had been shot there, as well as Bill Robinson's first film, *Harlem Is Heaven*. In June and July 1932 Aubrey Scotto made *The Divorce Racket* there, starring James Rennie and Olive Borden. That was followed immediately by *It Happened in Paris*, a musical remake of *The Two Orphans* (which had already been remade by D. W. Griffith as *Orphans of the Storm*). Like *Puss in Boots*, the film was produced and directed by M. J. Weisfeldt, with an original score by Nat Shilkret. Local band singer Ranny Weeks, who was subsequently signed by Herbert Yates for a series of B musicals at Republic, made his screen debut. The rest of the cast was composed of the usual mix of overage silent celebrities and Broadway hopefuls. Frank Zucker photographed all of these films. The studio was reasonably well equipped and close to the midtown ferry lines, but feature production had shut down by the end of the summer. In 1935 Sidney and M. J. Kandel, who owned Ideal Pictures, left the studio business and opened Bonded Film Storage, which soon became one of the leading film warehouses in the East.<sup>163</sup>

The Metropolitan studios, the most successful of the established rental stages, fared little better. In February 1932 it was announced that "Edgar George Ulmer, who was associated with the late F. W. Murnau as chief art director on *Sunrise*, will be in charge of [the] next Peerless production in the east."<sup>164</sup> Ulmer began directing *The Warning Shadow*, "a cinema fantasy with a New York background," on March 14.<sup>165</sup> The talent mix was typical: Ulmer was a jack-of-all-trades who had not yet directed a film in America; Tom Moore, the star, was another once-famous silent celebrity; Dita Parlo, a German actress who had failed to catch on in Hollywood, was on layover on her way back to Europe (she would become better known later for her work in *L'Atalante* [1934] and *La grande illusion* [1937]). Production seems to have been completed within two weeks, with some location shots taken at the Waldorf Astoria.<sup>166</sup>

Ulmer's film appears to have been an extremely fatalistic glimpse of New York nightlife at the bottom of the depression, prefiguring such later works of French "poetic realism" as *Quai des brumes* (1938) and *Le jour se lève* (1939). It was never released, perhaps never even completed. "The laboratory controlled the picture," Ulmer remembered, and a new producer, Johnnie Walker, took over the project and built a completely different film around Ulmer's footage.<sup>167</sup> Noting the success of the Radio Shorts Walter Winchell was making for Rowland and Brice (especially one called *Beauty on Broadway*), Walker hired rival columnist Ed Sullivan

and retitled the picture *Mr. Broadway*. Sullivan played himself, and the cameras followed him around various Manhattan nightspots as he gathered material for his column and greeted visiting celebrities along the way (Ernst Lubitsch, Lupe Velez, Jack Benny). Top local bandleaders, including Abe Lyman, Isham Jones, and Eddie Duchin, also put in appearances. About two reels of Ulmer's film were interpolated into this travelogue as a flashback narrated by Sullivan himself.

It was probably no coincidence that Ulmer's film collapsed at the same moment as Harry Langdon's "comeback" picture, which was also the same moment that Paramount finally abandoned its work in Astoria. The month of March 1932, bad enough for Hollywood, was cataclysmic for eastern producers, who were already operating much closer to the bone. To survive at all, the local industry would have to find something to make other than conventional features. In fact, the future could be glimpsed at Metropolitan almost as soon as Ulmer left. The stages were immediately occupied by Maurice Schwartz's Yiddish picture *Uncle Moses* and Bud Pollard's satirical race movie *The Black King*.<sup>168</sup> If the rest of the industry was sagging, niche audiences could still offer a market for local independents. Ironically, one of the few filmmakers who might be said to have benefited from the general industry collapse was Edgar G. Ulmer. Despite the unfortunate end of *The Warning Shadow*, he would soon find a home in the East directing some of the most stylish examples of local racial and ethnic production.

Without financing and distribution guarantees, the economics of low-budget production were now impossible. Dorothy Lee and Lee Moran appeared in *Mazie*, produced at Metropolitan by Plymouth Pictures. *Get That Venus*, with Ernest Truex and Jean Arthur, followed immediately. Jean Arthur had already made dozens of silent and sound films, but her screen career had never caught fire. Like Humphrey Bogart in *Midnight*, she was now marking time between Broadway appearances; her triumphant return to Hollywood was still another year off. Indeed, Arthur has almost nothing to do in this film, which at times seems little more than an extended vaudeville skit played by veterans Tom Howard and Harry Davenport. *Get That Venus* was produced in the summer of 1933 by Starmark Productions and supposedly financed by British investors. It was credited to the director "Grover Lee," a pseudonym of Italian-born Amerigo Serrao, who had become a naturalized U.S. citizen in the 1920s and worked in the American film industry before moving to Britain in 1930 to direct quota quickies (under the name Arthur Varney). He later claimed to have directed *two* films in Fort Lee, suggesting that he was also responsible for *Mazie*, a film produced and released without even the dignity of a director's credit.<sup>169</sup>

Across the river, *Convention Girl*, made by Falcon Pictures at the Photocolor studio in Hastings-on-Hudson, would seem to have been the last traditional states rights B picture produced in the East. A likely attempt to duplicate the notoriety of

Warners' recent *Convention City* (1933), it had a legitimate director (Luther Reed, who had once made important films for Paramount and RKO) and recognizable stars, Rose Hobart and Sally O'Neil. Much of the film was shot on location in Atlantic City in the summer of 1934, where the Isham Jones Orchestra was seen performing at the Ritz-Carleton Terrace. The girls are "hostesses" living off the town's stream of conventioners. Presumably prostitutes, by the time the Breen office finished with them they more closely resembled a team of especially friendly sorority sisters. They entice their clients into decorous chair rides on the Boardwalk or visits to the diving horse attraction on the Steel Pier. Their intentions are honorable throughout, which probably explains both the characters' lack of economic success and the film's unusual tedium. Too tame for the exploitation circuit but probably too suggestive for general audiences, *Convention Girl* was a film with no identifiable market and no economic justification for its existence. By the time it was released, industry observers were beginning to see the entire East Coast film industry in much the same light.

Margaret Winkler's trade advertisement in the 1922-1923 *Film Year Book*, promoting her two hottest cartoon properties: Pat Sullivan's "Felix the Cat" and Max Fleischer's "Out of the Inkwell." A few years later Winkler would discover Walt Disney.

## THE TWO BIG-LITTLE FEATURES

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Pat Sullivan's

New Series

### "Felix Cat Comics"

*Twenty-Four of the zippi-est single reels in the short subject field.*

Released Twice a Month



Max Fleischer's

New Series

### "Out of the Inkwell"

Comedies

*Thirteen sparkling and original comedies in the new series—released one every month.*

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## 9

# Cartoons in the City

### Animated Pictures

In 1935, just as Ben Hecht and Charles MacArthur were making their hasty exit from the Astoria studio, readers of *The Forum* were startled to hear the results of a national poll of America's schoolchildren. Asked to name their favorite cartoon character, respondents (if only by a small margin) cited not Mickey Mouse, but Popeye the Sailor.<sup>1</sup>

Although Walt Disney and his mouse had monopolized the popular perception of screen animation ever since *Steamboat Willie*, the Disney studio still produced only a small fraction of the animated cartoons then made in America. There were many rivals on both coasts, all struggling for advantage in an extremely fluid short-film marketplace. But if Mickey represented the first triumph of Hollywood animation, Popeye was a New Yorker, produced by Fleischer Studios in the very heart of New York's motion picture district, 1600 Broadway.

Unlike the occasional East Coast challenge thrown up by such renegade independent features as *The Emperor Jones* or *Crime without Passion*, the battle between Mickey and Popeye was still a fair fight. There had been no reason for the early animators to relocate to California, and as late as 1930, according to historian Michael Barrier, "New York was still the center of the animation industry, with Disney's the only significant West Coast studio."<sup>2</sup> Popeye's 1935 triumph, however, would prove a high-water mark for New York animation. By the end of the decade the local industry would be reduced from three healthy studios to a single, struggling Terrytoon operation in New Rochelle.

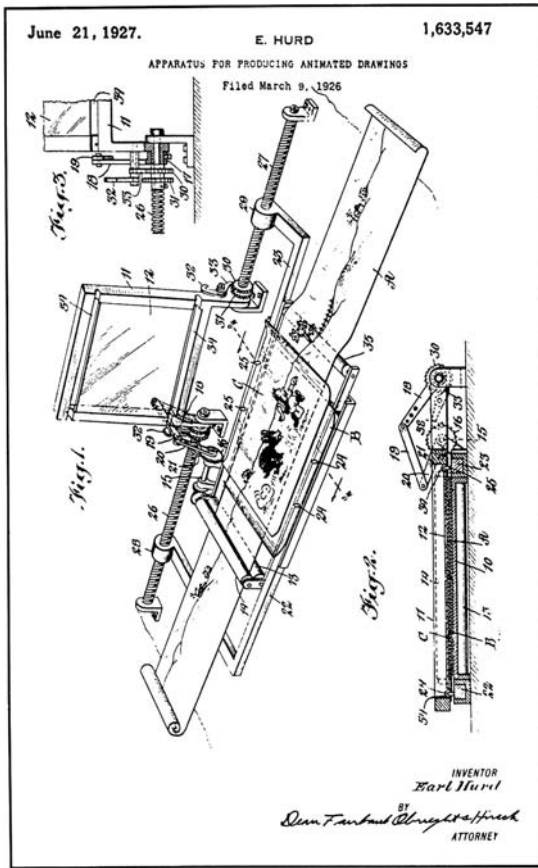


In the beginning, all of early cinema was commonly referred to as “animated pictures.”<sup>3</sup> But within a few years a distinct genre of animated trick film had captured the imagination of movie audiences. Many different strategies of single-frame animation were quickly developed, some involving cartooning (*Humorous Phases of Funny Faces*, Vitagraph, 1906), manipulation of clay models (*The Sculptor’s Nightmare*, Biograph, 1908), or stop-motion photography (*The Haunted Hotel*, Vitagraph, 1907).<sup>4</sup> When the public eventually rejected the entire trick film genre as obsolete, animation, of whatever character, disappeared along with it.

The prodigious graphic artist Winsor McCay, operating from his Brooklyn studio in Sheepshead Bay, single-handedly brought his Little Nemo character to the screen in 1911, but McCay’s labor-intensive style would prove impractical for the developing motion picture industry.<sup>5</sup> To survive commercially, animated films required a breakthrough in both production and distribution comparable to what the nickelodeon era had accomplished for live-action films. The opportunity finally came in 1912–1913, when Éclair, Pathé, Universal, and other newsreel distributors began to seek ways to incorporate newspaper-style cartoons and comic strips into their weekly release schedules, creating the first market demand for animated cartoons.

Pioneer French animator Emile Cohl arrived at the Éclair studio in Fort Lee in the fall of 1912 and was quickly put to work animating a weekly “cartoon” for the Éclair Journal.<sup>6</sup> These brief vignettes lasted only a minute or two and covered such topics as “War in Turkey” and “Wilson and the Tariffs.”<sup>7</sup> Of greater consequence was Cohl’s work on “The Newlyweds,” the first continuing animated cartoon series. According to historian Donald Crafton, this film adaptation of George McManus’s popular comic strip dealing with the misadventures of two doting parents and their irascible offspring, “Baby Snookums,” was also the first series to be sold to the public using the words “animated cartoons.”<sup>8</sup> Cohl returned to Paris in March 1914 and Éclair discontinued the series, but the production of “animated” versions of newspaper comic strips was already spreading.

McCay had drawn each frame entirely from scratch, background as well as foreground. Cohl saved time by generally avoiding backgrounds and sometimes relied on animated cutouts to provide movement. J. R. Bray, a cartoonist for the *Brooklyn Eagle*, understood that this workshop style, which depended on the intensive labor of a single skilled artist, was not efficient enough to meet the demands of the distribution system and found ways to divide this labor among a series of workers, much like an automobile assembly line. Beginning in 1914, he submitted a series of patents for processes designed to industrialize cartoon animation by breaking it into component parts. Static backgrounds were prepared on separate sheets, which did not need to be redrawn for each exposure. Foreground action was analyzed so that only the necessary moving elements (arms, legs) might be drawn. Skilled animators



One of Earl Hurd's patents describing a means of automating the production of animated cartoons, part of the Bray-Hurd patent pool that controlled the commercial animation business.

would draw the outline of a character in key poses, journeymen would create the “in-between” images, and “inkers” would color it all in. Means were described for registering these image layers before the camera. After partnering with Earl Hurd, whose own patents involved the use of transparent celluloid overlays, Bray achieved effective control over the technology required for the successful mass production of animated cartoons (what came to be known as the “cel animation” process).<sup>9</sup>

Bray used this process for his “Col. Heeza Liar” series at Pathé as early as 1913. After he opened a new studio at 23 East 26th Street, his films were picked up by Paramount (1916), then Goldwyn (1920). But Bray was more interested in pursuing patent infringers and developing his nontheatrical business than improving the style or content of his own cartoons.<sup>10</sup> Winsor McCay’s handmade *Gertie the Dinosaur* (1914) would prove an inspiration for generations of future animators; Bray’s “Farmer Al Falfa” and “Bobby Bumps” series seemed mechanical and unimaginative by comparison. Bray did produce the first cartoon filmed in a natural color process, *The Debut of Thomas Katt* (Brewster Color, 1920), but by the early 1920s the industry was

in a slump, and he had lost many of his key animators, including Paul Terry and the Fleischer brothers, Max and Dave. In 1924 Walter Lantz and Clyde Geronimi created the amusing “Dinky Doodle” series for Bray, a combination of live action and animation featuring Lantz himself as a genial Harold Lloyd character.<sup>11</sup> But Bray grew disenchanted with theatrical animation and left the business in 1927, devoting his studio entirely to industrial work.<sup>12</sup>

Raoul Barré, a clever and ambitious animator who introduced several mechanical innovations of his own, operated a rival studio in the Fordham Arcade building at 190th Street and Webster Avenue.<sup>13</sup> Barré was the first animator to use pegs to register the individual image sheets, and he created a “slash” system of handling backgrounds that did not infringe on the Bray-Hurd patents.<sup>14</sup> Barré produced the “Animated Grouch Chaser” series for Edison in 1915 with a staff that included Gregory La Cava, Frank Moser, and Pat Sullivan, but by the end of the year his operation was being swallowed up by William Randolph Hearst’s International Film Service. After Barré was pushed out by Hearst, he teamed with Charles Bowers on the “Mutt and Jeff” series for cartoonist Bud Fisher and established a new studio at 2555 Webster Avenue. Unhappy with Bowers, and still bitter over the Hearst business, Barré appears to have suffered a nervous breakdown in 1919. “He was going to lose his whole business and he lost his mind, poor Barré did,” remembered Dick Huemer, one of his staff at the time. “He was such a nice little Frenchman, with his funny way of talking. . . . Cute guy, too bad he finally lost his marbles.”<sup>15</sup> Bowers continued the series on his own, eventually moving to a small studio in Yonkers. Within a few years he would be no longer just another cartoonist but the producer and star of an extraordinary series of comedies combining live-action and stop-motion animation.

Mutt and Jeff proved remarkably durable, starring in more than three hundred cartoons before the series ended in 1926. But neither Bowers nor Barré received any credit. Bud Fisher, who had created the strip, insisted that only his name appear in connection with the films, even though he seldom bothered to show up at the studio. Indeed, he suggested to the press that even while visiting Europe he was still somehow “directing the productions by cable.” Yet, as Leonard Maltin has pointed out, the humor of the shorts “was not so much Bud Fisher’s as that of the Barré-Bowers staff—earthy at times and ethnic, reflecting its New York origins.”<sup>16</sup>

William Randolph Hearst began making animated cartoons as a way of expanding his media empire from newsprint to motion pictures. In 1915, when he was releasing his newsreel through Vitagraph, he ordered the inclusion of an “animated” section featuring his top comic strip attractions: Tom Powers’s “Phables,” George Herrimann’s “Krazy Kat,” Frederick Oppen’s “Happy Hooligan,” Rudolph Dirks’s “The Katzenjammer Kids,” and a host of others. At first these were made under the direction of Raoul Barré at his Bronx studio, but within a few months Barré’s name disappeared from the credits. Gregory La Cava emerged as the head of the

new Hearst animation studio, taking most of Barré's staff with him to new quarters at 729 Seventh Avenue.

Hearst's was the first modern animation studio, not "an enormous bare loft" without curtains or carpets, like Barré's shop, but a well-organized division of a thriving business empire.<sup>17</sup> Within a few years La Cava and his staff would change both the content and the style of American animation. The early Krazy Kat cartoons, for example, were awkwardly composed and stiffly animated—simple transpositions of newspaper strips, with all their humor embedded in dialogue balloons. Things changed quickly. La Cava "made the first storyboards for animated cartoons," Walter Lantz remembered. "He would draw them on big legal sheets of yellow paper; they'd have a lot of these little sketches, maybe 2 by 3 inches—lay them out on a table and go over the script with us. He was able to develop plots, and have one idea in a story, instead of just having characters running from left to right, saying anything at all."<sup>18</sup>

At the same time, William Nolan, the studio's prize animator, introduced a smoother method of articulating human motion. Rejecting any attempt at a realistic style, he developed an amorphous "rubber hose" effect, in which arms and legs swung wildly and the shape of a body might "squash and stretch" at will. Nolan's "cartoony" style of drawing would dominate the industry until the triumph of Disney animation a decade later. To some, the introduction of storyboarding and "rubber hose" animation make La Cava and Nolan the Griffith and Bitzer of cartoons, the men who showed the artistic potential of J. R. Bray's industrial assembly line. But until recently so little was known about this studio that even its years of operation were in dispute.<sup>19</sup>

The slump in the motion picture industry in 1920–1921 hurt more than just the feature-film business. Animated films had never connected with audiences, and many theaters showed them only because they arrived as part of some larger package. "Very often they didn't even run the cartoons," Dick Huemer remembered of the way his work was treated. "If the exhibitor hated cartoons, he didn't run them. That's how interested they were."<sup>20</sup> Not long after moving his cartoon operation into the new Cosmopolitan-International studio on 127th Street, even Hearst backed out of the animation business. (Krazy Kat, one of the iconic figures of 1920s Americana, did return in 1925. Working with William Nolan, producer Charles Mintz had some success with the character before moving his studio to the West Coast in 1930.)<sup>21</sup>

With the exception of Krazy Kat, most of the characters appearing in these early animated films were more or less human—The Newlyweds, Col. Heeza Liar, Mutt and Jeff. Otto Messmer, a young animator working for Pat Sullivan's studio in 1919, realized that it was impossible to compete with the antics of Hollywood's slapstick comedians on a cartoon budget. Given the chance to create a new character, he reimaged Charlie Chaplin as a small black cat, and designed for him a world of

impossible challenges and transformations.<sup>22</sup> This was no accident. The small Sullivan studio at 125 West 42nd Street had produced a series of Chaplin cartoons in 1918, and two years earlier had created the “Sammie Johnsin” series, which featured a Sambo-like character even more put upon than Charlie. Messmer combined elements from these two characters into an eternally struggling everyman figure he first called “Master Tom.” By 1920 the *Paramount Screen Magazine* was featuring him as Felix the Cat.

### Felix

The studio moved to the Lincoln Arcade building at Broadway and 66th Street, where Otto Messmer and one or two assistants produced a new Felix cartoon every four weeks. Sullivan arranged for the character’s promotion and distribution, and Margaret Winkler began selling the Felix films on the states rights market and handling the pictures internationally. Within months Felix was more than just a movie star. Stuffed toys and boudoir dolls were already familiar decorator items at the beginning of the 1920s. Sullivan (or Winkler?) arranged to license Felix to the Gund Company, which began producing three sizes of plush velvet Felixes, a sideline that quickly turned into a bonanza. Felix’s image soon appeared on everything from wind-up toys to chinaware. Not only did the fad for Felix memorabilia bring its own income stream, but sales acted synergistically to promote the cartoons, making Felix the only true animation star of the decade. Walt Disney (another of Margaret Winkler’s clients) would develop this licensed market even further with Mickey Mouse.

Felix did not become a star just because he appealed to the same audience instincts as Charlie Chaplin (indeed, the Chaplin cartoons had not been especially popular). Instead, credit must go to Messmer’s ability to create this character on screen through his mastery of both graphic design and personality animation. The spare animation style never wastes a line, partly a result of Sullivan’s refusal to license cel animation technology from J. R. Bray. But the streamlined characters and uncluttered horizons are also clearly related to the new, simplified style of illustration in 1920s visual culture. The character design takes advantage of Bill Nolan’s rubbery animation style but goes a step further, with playful and impossible transformations supplying both gags and narrative resolution (Felix’s tail serves more functions than a Swiss Army knife). The cat displays some human characteristics, but his needs and emotions are essentially feline: food, shelter, companionship. Stories, no matter how fanciful, always grow out of the emotional needs of this character and play off established audience expectations. Such character-driven comedy had never been seen in animated film before, and would appear again only with the most successful cartoons from Disney and Warner Bros.

By 1923 the Sullivan studio staff had begun to expand, eventually enlisting the talents of men like Bill Nolan, Burt Gillett, Al Eugster, and even Raoul Barré. Sullivan relocated to larger quarters at 47 West 63rd Street. On his trip to New York in September 1928 to record the score for *Steamboat Willie*, Walt Disney did his best to raid Sullivan's studio, targeting Messmer specifically. But Felix was not just one of Messmer's characters: deep down, he *was* Otto Messmer. Disney settled for Burt Gillett, who would direct *The Three Little Pigs* for him a few years later.<sup>23</sup>

Messmer should have taken the offer. The "Felix the Cat" series suddenly ended in 1928, for reasons that are still not completely clear. The oft-repeated legend is that Pat Sullivan declined to invest in sound technology, leading Educational to drop his distribution contract. But the last Felix cartoon in the series (prophetically titled *Felix the Cat in The Last Life*) was released on August 5, 1928, months before *Steamboat Willie* transformed the animation business. Contract negotiations with Educational must have transpired the previous spring, when the lack of sound in a cartoon would hardly have seemed a deal breaker. (Paramount continued to release silent "Inkwell Imps" cartoons as late as July 1929.) Rather than a victim of sound, Felix seems to have been a victim of his employer, Pat Sullivan, whose heavy drinking and indifference to the details of his business allowed the greatest franchise in silent animation to evaporate. And if Sullivan was oblivious to the true state of things, Otto Messmer was in a complete state of denial. Messmer's recollection that he turned Disney down because "it looked like Felix would go on forever"—after the series had already lost its distributor—seems strange indeed.<sup>24</sup>

### Terrytoons

The only New York animation studio of the 1920s that did go on forever (or at least until it dissolved into Viacom in 1972) was Paul Terry's Terrytoons. An employee of J. R. Bray before the war, Terry began work in 1921 on "Aesop's Film Fables," the greatest single example of mass production in the silent animation industry. "It was Terry, far more than Bray, who established cartoon production on an industrial basis," notes historian Michael Barrier. "Terry's characters, most of them animals, were usually so brutally simple in design that they could be drawn and traced onto cels swiftly even by inexperienced help."<sup>25</sup> While the Sullivan studio was producing one Felix cartoon a month, Terry issued a new Aesop's Fable every week for eight years.

The achievement is even more remarkable considering that Terry started this operation in the midst of the general industry decline that drove even the Hearst animation studio out of the business. The series was produced by Amadee J. Van Beuren, an entrepreneur who had made his fortune peddling coin-in-slot novelty machines, and it was backed by the Keith-Albee theater chain. Animation historians typically dismiss Terry's cartoons as simple-minded and repetitious (literally,



the same drawings might be used on more than one film), and instead prize the more imaginative work of Otto Messmer and the Fleischers, clearly designed to appeal primarily to adult audiences.<sup>26</sup> Terry's cartoons, on the other hand, succeeded because he had identified a new audience for animation. While screening one of his early films for a group of neighborhood children, Terry was surprised by their enthusiastic reaction.

When they ran the picture, these kids began to squeal. And that tipped me off to the idea to draw things that would appeal to kids; because if they laughed at it, the adults wouldn't have to know if it was funny, or whether it wasn't, because kids' laughter is so infectious. I decided right then and there, you make pictures for kids. I probably didn't know enough to make anything for adults, anyway.<sup>27</sup>

This same discovery was also made by producers of serials, who after the war abandoned more adult subjects, like Irene Castle's *Patria* (1918), in favor of Saturday matinee adventures aimed at less critical audiences.

Terry kept costs down by maximizing the benefits of cel animation, declining to license any existing comic characters, offering salaries at the low end of the scale, and driving his staff mercilessly. We "sweat from morning until night to get the pictures out," remembered Terry's partner, Frank Moser. "When I went home I was tired out. I just did the best I could, and I sweat blood to deliver those pictures." The emphasis on quantity over quality was apparent to all, especially those inside the organization. The staff worked hard, but "they couldn't do much if you took them off cats and mice," animator Bill Tytla remembered.<sup>28</sup> Terry soon learned he could disguise these shortcomings by emphasizing speed and violence. His one continuing character in this period, Farmer Al Falfa, fought a never-ending battle against the streams of mice that filled Terry's Fables; cats, dogs, and various other critters constantly chased one another around the frame in what Michael Barrier refers to as "brute force" cartooning. "Such cartoons commanded an audience's attention, if not necessarily its admiration."<sup>29</sup>

In 1929, Terry and Van Beuren parted company. Cartoons like *The Jail Breaker* and *Presto Change-o* (both released in May 1929) were competent enough, but their Josiah Zuro sound tracks had nothing to do with the visuals, unlike cartoons being developed by the more sophisticated animation studios. Terry and Moser found backing from Audio-Cinema and established Terrytoons in Audio's small studio in Long Island City, then moved to the Bronx after Audio acquired the old Edison studio there. The Terry connection gave Audio-Cinema a special advantage in its industrial film operation, notably in a series of cartoons made for Aetna Insurance (for example, *He Auto Know Better*, 1930).<sup>30</sup> When Audio-Cinema collapsed, Terry-

toons operated out of the Erbograph Laboratory building at 203 West 146th Street before finding a permanent home at 271 North Avenue in New Rochelle in 1934.

Terry's cartoons were contracted to Educational, which provided shorts to Fox (later 20th Century-Fox). Although there were occasional grumbles regarding the quality of these films, the economics of Terry's operation were unbeatable. Even when he cut back production to one cartoon every two weeks, Terry continued to use every shortcut imaginable. "If we had a mouse running across a scene, which most of Paul Terry's stuff did," recalled Jack Zander, "he would go get that scene [from the files] and we'd use the same mouse again. They might possibly opaque him a different color, but maybe not."<sup>31</sup> Terry also held his animators to a quota system, rewarding the most prolific with gold stars. The practice created a system of favorites at the studio and encouraged animators to fight one another for the easiest work. When Don Figlozzi came to work for Terry after the Fleischer studio left New York, he was startled to see Terry's cousin, Charlie Perrin, seated at a high platform in the center of the studio, monitoring the work of the staff like the overseer of a sweatshop. Terry hired Figlozzi at his old salary of \$50 a week, then cut him to \$35 two weeks later because he knew Figlozzi had nowhere else to work.<sup>32</sup>

Terry also did his best to avoid such luxuries as color or pencil tests, and even resisted the introduction of continuing characters in his films (always with the exception of Farmer Al Falfa). Although he eventually developed such characters as Lucky Duck and Rufus Rooster, Terry preferred the freedom to animate whatever animals he liked. "Up here we haven't a single character that we're stuck with," he told the *New York Times* in 1940. "We take any idea that sounds like a laugh."<sup>33</sup>

### Van Beuren Animation

Paul Terry's reluctance to spend a dime on upgrading his productions is said to have been the cause of his break with Amadee J. Van Beuren in 1929.<sup>34</sup> In a series of mergers masterminded by Joseph P. Kennedy, the Keith-Albee theater chain joined with Pathé to become a component of RKO, and Van Beuren took over complete control of the Fables cartoon operation. He renamed the studio for himself, promoted John Foster to replace Terry, and allowed things to continue much as they always had. "Foster had a system of calling in about five of the top animators, the old-timers, into a story conference," animator Hicks Lokey told Harvey Deneroff:

They'd start a bull session and get halfway through with the production of a film and somebody would come up with another gag and would require them to change it into a baseball picture. And they would do that! They would throw out five or six weeks' work because they had a funny picture to

work on—they thought it was going to be funny. In that way, they got five or six pictures behind schedule.<sup>35</sup>

As before, this arbitrary gag structure was matched by an equally casual musical score. Through its link with Pathé, the Van Beuren studio first used Josiah Zuro to supply these tracks, then Carl Edouarde. After the Pathé fire Gene Rodemich became the in-house music director, and his sprightly small-group orchestrations, tied more closely to the visuals, eventually helped to rejuvenate the old Fables series.<sup>36</sup> Indeed, films like *Romeo Robin* (1930) and *Cowboy Cabaret* (1931) were little more than illustrated musical numbers. Song lyrics might be heard from the screen in Van Beuren cartoons, but as late as 1933 there was seldom any dialogue, making things that much easier for the animators. Even if occasional films, like *Cinderella Blues* (1931), had a conventional storyline, the typical cartoon was little more than a collection of musical gags.

Leonard Maltin suggests that Paul Terry depended on animal characters as a way of avoiding offensive ethnic stereotyping, which even in this period could lead to protests from exhibitors.<sup>37</sup> After Foster took over the Van Beuren studio, he introduced more human characters, notably the “Tom and Jerry” series in 1931.<sup>38</sup> Without the familiar cats and mice to fall back on, Foster turned to the same cultural stereotyping that New York’s short-film producers were exploiting, now exaggerated into cartoon caricature. Blacks, Asians, Hispanics, Jews, Indians, and homosexuals were all good for a laugh. In *Uncle Tom and Little Eva* (1932), a musical burlesque of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s novel, one slave’s face is transformed into a grinning watermelon, and Topsy tap-dances on the auction block to the tune of “Bye, Bye, Blackbird.”

In truth, Foster was probably no less sensitive than other animation directors of the day, but he did have a weakness for seizing whatever iconic images were available. The most famous example was his cloning of Mickey and Minnie Mouse for a series of Fables cartoons, including *A Close Call* (1930) and *Cowboy Blues* (1931). Disney was able to compel Van Beuren to drop the characters, even though his own mouse was clearly influenced by those created for the Fables in the 1920s by Paul Terry.<sup>39</sup> He argued that these mice were behaving inappropriately and therefore damaging the reputation of his characters. (In *A Close Call*, for example, “Minnie” drops her pleated skirt, and “Mickey” picks it up and plays it like an accordion.)

George Stallings replaced Foster a few months later and upgraded the quality of the animation. It was Stallings, apparently, who promoted a new animator, Frank Tashlin, then still signing his work “Tish-Tash.” *Hook & Ladder Hokum* (1933), Tashlin’s first screen credit, features the broad caricatures of popular celebrities—here Ed Wynn and Al Jolson—that would mark his later cartoons for Warner Bros., as well as much of his live-action work.<sup>40</sup> Stallings also imposed a semblance of narrative order on the cartoons. The Tom and Jerry series, especially, began to take on

an intriguing working-class ambiance. In *Happy Hoboes* (1933) the pair is living in a squalid Hooverville, with the skyscrapers of an anonymous city in the background. A cop posts a notice ordering “All bums out of here by sundown.” With hundreds of others, Tom and Jerry take to the rails in search of food and shelter—and eventually wind up right where they started. *The Phantom Rocket* (1933) opens with teams of proletarian laborers constructing a space ship, much as the Warner features of the day often celebrated the lives of blue-collar workers.

After the Fleischers successfully introduced the comic strip character Popeye in 1933, Stallings responded with a brief series based on Otto Soglow’s “The Little King,” but the humor of that strip was too subtle for Van Beuren’s staff. Far more significant was another failed series, a cartoon version of Freeman Gosden and Charles Correll’s fabulously successful *Amos ’n’ Andy* radio program. The cartoons were nearly all dialogue, their sound tracks almost indistinguishable from radio transcriptions. The animators had to follow these recordings slavishly and also needed to create a far more realistic graphic environment, increasing costs dramatically. *The Rasslin’ Match* and *The Lion Tamer* (both 1934) are remarkable achievements, especially for this scrappy little studio, but they have very little relation to the rest of cartoon animation, resembling instead a drawn version of an especially talkie comedy short.

At this point the studio’s distributor, RKO, began to lose patience. Van Beuren enticed Burt Gillett back from the Disney studio and gave him orders to upgrade the operation, which included shifting to an all-color release schedule, still a novelty in 1934. Gillett brought some of Disney’s ideas with him, which he dispensed with an air of condescension toward his old associates. “The people who were there before him felt, ‘why the hell did they take this swell-head from Disney,’” animator I. Klein recalled. The New York animators were not keen to be reminded of their reduced status and resented the interloper from Hollywood. “Very seldom did they say, ‘Gee, that’s great—a good man came in.’”<sup>41</sup> For his part, Gillett further aggravated the staff by inviting young Disney artists to lecture the New York veterans on animation. Within six months he had fired fifty people “because of incompetence or inability to meet my requirements.”<sup>42</sup> The effect on morale was predictable.

During the two years that Gillett was in charge, the studio’s style changed completely. The rough, jazzy, gag-driven films of Foster and Stallings were replaced by Gillett’s “Rainbow Parade” series, an attempt to ape Disney’s “Silly Symphonies” at a fraction of the cost. Tom and Jerry gave way to a series of lovable cows and elves. Gillett’s attempt to revive “The Toonerville Trolley” and “Felix the Cat” in 1936 highlighted all the weaknesses of attempting to graft a West Coast style onto an East Coast studio. The resulting films not only lacked the charm, graphic sophistication, and logical storyline of a Disney film, they also showed no signs of the Van Beuren studio’s earlier energy and imagination.

Only once did these competing forces successfully come together, in *The Sunshine*

*Makers* (1935), a truly bizarre cartoon directed by Ted Eshbaugh. A world of elves is divided into two camps, Joys and Glooms. The Joys smile a lot and spend their time bottling sunshine. The Glooms relish their permanent state of depression (“We’re happy when we’re sad. We’re always feelin’ bad,” is their mantra). A battle between the two forces results in victory for the Joys, who literally pour sunshine down the throats of their rivals. Fully transformed, the ex-Glooms suddenly seem lobotomized, singing and dancing the song of the Joys. What should be a straightforward victory of good guys over bad guys does not exactly read that way, however. There is more than a hint of *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* here, told from the point of view of the pod people. On the other hand, *The Sunshine Makers* could just as easily be an allegory marking the triumph of “happy animation” over the dark, untidy, cerebral style identified with New York. “As the picture was being finished, there was an ominous mood in the studio,” recalled I. Klein, who animated a good part of it. “People were being fired before they could really prove themselves, and Burt Gillett seemed more interested in building partitions between floor areas than in supervising cartoon production.”<sup>43</sup> Finally cutting its losses, RKO stopped trying to emulate Disney, signed the man himself, and dropped its contract with Van Beuren, forcing the studio out of business in 1936.

The clash of style and temperament seen at the Van Beuren studio after Gillett’s arrival suggests that some very basic distinctions had already emerged between East and West Coast animation. As Mark Langer has demonstrated, these differences involved not only the backgrounds of those running the studios, but also the impact on their work of the immediate cultural environment.<sup>44</sup> McCay, Barré, Bray, Sullivan, and Fleischer all had prior experience as newspaper cartoonists or comic strip artists and were used to recasting the world in stylized “cartoony” fashion, both graphically and in terms of narrative continuity. In California, Disney, Ub Iwerks, Hugh Harman, and Rudolf Ising were all commercial artists and illustrators, trained in a more representational graphic style. Where their work exhibited greater concern for mass and perspective, that of the East Coast animators remained adamantly two-dimensional. Indeed, East Coast films were far more likely to emphasize the artifice of cartooning itself, with the “Dinky Doodle” and “Out of the Inkwell” series based entirely on this conceit.

In Hollywood, illusionism was king. Some studios even paid their animators to attend figure study classes, a gesture that would have seemed incomprehensible in New York. Eventually, the box-office success of the West Coast style, led by Disney, caused even those within the local industry to dismiss the East Coast approach as crude and inartistic. Leonard Maltin quotes one anonymous New York animator who completely accepted this argument: “Those people who were quite content with the raw, peasant humor, the bad drawing, the kind of not-too-thought-out timing and the simpleminded stories . . . that bunch stayed here. The more adventurous, who really wanted to learn to do a better movie, left here. Every one of them.”<sup>45</sup>

West Coast cartoons generally reflected the conventional “realism” of their live-action neighbors and did their best to emulate the institutional style of Hollywood features, creating goal-driven narratives around coherent character personalities. In New York, physical mutability and transformation were much more central, from Felix’s tail to the surreal metamorphoses of Fleischer’s early talkies. Characterization and narrative were no more stable than geography. New York cartoons were also more likely to be populated by adult human characters living in urban environments and interacting with various ethnic and minority groups. On the West Coast, cartoon characters tended to live in detached suburban, or even barnyard, environments and were themselves often pigs, ducks, mice, or rabbits. Indeed, many key West Coast animators had been farm boys or grew up in small midwestern towns and found their first big-city jobs in Kansas City.

Perhaps most significantly, West Coast animation also tended to project what Langer calls Hollywood’s “normative ideological meanings”: conservative lessons intended to reinforce middle-American values. In New York, animation was far more likely to reflect (or at least acknowledge) aberrant and even outlaw behavior, especially in terms of sex, jazz, and Prohibition. What Hollywood cartoon of this period would dare celebrate the music of Cab Calloway or Louis Armstrong? To see this world on-screen, one needs to look at the films of the Fleischer studio.

### Out of an Inkwell

Max Fleischer first became interested in animated cartoons as a technological challenge. He had been a staff artist on the *Brooklyn Eagle* before the war (where he briefly knew J. R. Bray) and eventually became art editor of *Popular Science*. Like Bray, Fleischer was interested in finding a way of mechanizing animated film production, and in 1915 he patented the Rotoscope, a device that back-projected live-action footage beneath an animator’s drawing stand, allowing the artist to trace the movements frame by frame. As a test, he dressed his brother Dave in the black-and-white costume of a clown and produced two minutes of remarkably fluid and lifelike animation. Bray hired Fleischer and his clown to work for him on the Paramount-Bray Pictographs, but the war interrupted this project, and Fleischer was instead assigned to produce training films for the U.S. Army in Fort Sill, Oklahoma.

Bray moved the Pictograph series to Goldwyn after the Armistice, by which time Max Fleischer had turned over direction of the films to his brother. Max appears in the films as an animator, the clown as his creation. Such brief animations as *The Tantalizing Fly* (1919) are simple exercises in the exploitation of the Rotoscope, which allowed lifelike movement and unusual perspective changes well beyond the abilities of anyone other than Winsor McCay. The films also employ as little animation as possible, intercutting between the Rotoscoped clown and considerable



live-action footage in yet another solution to the problem of animation's intensive labor costs.

The Bray studio was also a pioneer in industrial and nontheatrical animation, and Fleischer would make significant contributions to this field throughout his career. *All Aboard for the Moon* (Goldwyn-Bray Pictographs, 1920) is still impressive in its rendering of an atomic-powered rocket achieving escape velocity on a lunar flight. Later, Fleischer would produce ambitious feature-length educational films on *The Einstein Theory of Relativity* and *Evolution* (both 1923), employing the Bray studio's established mix of live action and animation. According to historian Leslie Cabarga, Einstein himself praised *Relativity* as "an excellent attempt to illustrate an abstract subject."<sup>46</sup>

In 1921 Fleischer took his "Out of the Inkwell" series away from Bray, moved into a studio of his own at 129 East 45th Street, and began producing a new series for the states rights market (the inevitable Margaret Winkler was also Fleischer's distribution agent).<sup>47</sup> Like Pat Sullivan, Fleischer demanded that his small staff (including Roland Crandall, Dick Huemer, Burt Gillett, and brother Dave) devote all their energies to one character, producing a new Inkwell release every month. The extensive and imaginative combination of live action and animation was unique in this period, and the films sold well. But Fleischer also understood that the cartoon characters who occupied the frame with him need not obey the same laws of physics—indeed, it was funnier if they didn't.

At the start of each film Max would draw the clown (now called Ko-Ko) on a large sheet of sketching paper. Actual animation equipment is seldom shown in these films; the suggestion is that Max creates everything freehand, working not as an animator but as a more generic "artist." Unlike Felix, Ko-Ko is not a character with an individualized personality. Instead, the films always center on the dynamic between Max and his creation: like some petulant god, Max conjures up Ko-Ko and his world, then proceeds to meddle in his creation's affairs, place spiteful obstacles in his path, or simply ignore him. The clown responds as best he can, sometimes plotting with his canine companion Fitz to turn the tables on Max, or at least achieve some simple victory before disappearing back into the inkwell.

At the end of 1923 Fleischer moved to larger quarters at 1600 Broadway and established his own distribution organization, Red Seal Pictures. He began a new series of "Song Cartunes," essentially an animated version (with very little animation) of the old song slides popular in nickelodeon days. Several of these were synchronized by the De Forest Phonofilm system for use at the Rialto Theatre and a few other wired houses years before other animators attempted to work with sound. Still, most creative energy went into the Inkwell series, as in *The Cartoon Factory* (1924), a remarkable variation in which Ko-Ko masters photographic technology and creates multiple copies of Max.

To meet the demands of Red Seal's distribution operation, the Fleischers began to produce live-action comedies in 1926, hiring Bradley Barker to direct a short-lived series featuring Peggy Shaw, "Carrie of the Chorus."<sup>48</sup> Desperate measures like this only made things worse, and within months Red Seal was in bankruptcy. Fleischer then formed a new partnership with Alfred Weiss, renamed his series "The Inkwell Imps," and doubled production to two films a month after signing with Paramount.<sup>49</sup>

The Paramount circuit was the greatest showcase a short-film producer could hope for, and Fleischer's work was now regularly featured in the largest and finest theaters in the country. The studio's ability to combine live action and animation continued to develop, as in *Ko-Ko's Earth Control* (1928), an apocalyptic fantasy in which New York's skyscrapers tumble when Fitz spitefully throws a lever launching the end of the world. *Ko-Ko's Hot Ink* (1929) showcased Fleischer's new Rotograph technology, an improvement on the Rotoscope in which live-action footage was back-projected beneath an animation stand, allowing cels to be laid over this image and rephotographed (the same principle used in the optical printer).<sup>50</sup> Although Fleischer's experience with De Forest should have given him an advantage when sound cartoons became the rage, he lost valuable time in a struggle with Alfred Weiss over control of his own studio. He spent much of 1929 in exile in Long Island City, sharing office space with Carpenter-Goldman, an industrial film producer.<sup>51</sup> Here he made a few simple "Screen Songs" and an occasional industrial film, notably *Finding His Voice*, an explanation of the Western Electric sound film system, from a script credited to "W. E. Erpi." By October 1929, Max and Dave had reorganized as Fleischer Studios, Inc. and returned in force to 1600 Broadway.

Fleischer pressed ahead with the Screen Songs, which at first were little more than talkie versions of the old Song Cartunes.<sup>52</sup> Each cartoon illustrated a single number with the aid of a bouncing ball, a formal straitjacket that quickly forced the staff to develop innovative ways of presenting this rather conventional material. One solution was to abandon familiar standards like *I've Got Rings on My Fingers* (released December 17, 1929) in favor of current hits like *The Glow Worm* (August 18, 1930) and *You're Driving Me Crazy* (September 19, 1931). This gave the films an edgy, contemporary sound quite different from West Coast animation and established connections with local jazz and dance band musicians, both black and white. Drawing on its experience in combining live action and animation, the studio began featuring top recording talent in its cartoons as early as September 1930, when Fleischer released the first of a series of Screen Songs starring Rudy Vallee. Subsequent releases featured acts like the Mills Brothers (*I Ain't Got Nobody*, June 17, 1932), Lillian Roth (*Down among the Sugar Cane*, August 26, 1932), the Boswell Sisters (*When It's Sleepy Time Down South*, November 11, 1932), and Ethel Merman (*Time on My Hands*, December 23, 1932).

The studio soon moved from sentimental ballads to material that would be more interesting to animate, a tendency clearly evident in the innovative “Talkartoon” series that eventually supplanted the Screen Songs. The Talkartoons were still musicals, but the bouncing ball was replaced with a rudimentary narrative featuring one of the studio’s resident characters. Over the next few years many of these films would draw heavily on musical numbers from other Paramount features and shorts, such as *Betty Boop’s Big Boss* (June 2, 1933), which covers nearly the entire score of Rodgers and Hart’s 1932 feature *Love Me Tonight*. But even the earliest Talkartoons, like *Swing, You Sinners* (September 24, 1930) and *Mysterious Mose* (December 26, 1930), revel in that mixture of hot music, surreal graphics, and blatant sexuality that marks the great Fleischer cartoons of 1931–1933. Just how conscious Fleischer and his staff were of the modernist currents running through their work is impossible to say. Max’s son Richard, later a successful director in Hollywood, remembered that the first film his father ever took him to see was *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*. “Perhaps it was his way of making me aware that there was more than one way of looking at reality.”<sup>53</sup>

If Disney labored over the exact synchronization of a film like *Steamboat Willie* with almost surgical precision, the Talkartoons achieved their effects quite differently. The *New York Times* described a visit to the Fleischers’ “news lab” at Eleventh Avenue and 43rd Street, where the entire sound track was being laid down for *Dizzy Dishes* (released August 9, 1930).

In the studio Max and his three assistants sit at a long table, each with his cue sheet telling him what, when and how to make noise. Around them, in neat rows, are the implements of their trade, ready to be grasped and laid down again with one motion. Each has his own microphone. The picture is flashed on the screen and the boys get to work. To one side of them are the dialogue men, saying their pieces into the microphone in crazily distorted voices. In front of them the orchestra provides the musical accompaniment, now high, now low, but, like everything else in this business, following a split-second precision.<sup>54</sup>

The fact that music, sound effects, and dialogue were still being recorded simultaneously seems remarkably primitive. Paramount had been mixing tracks over at Astoria for at least a year. But what the Talkartoons lost in polish they more than made up for in spontaneity. The controlled chaos in the recording studio suggests a live television broadcast of the “golden age,” with Fleischer feverishly producing sound effects with ratchets, sandpaper, and a bag of marbles while a jazz band plays and the voice actors attempt to mouth something appropriate.

By 1930 Fleischer had retired Ko-Ko the Clown in favor of a new character, Bimbo, a dog with human attributes (or a human with dog attributes?) and a much

stronger libido. In *Dizzy Dishes* Bimbo encounters another hybrid creature with the ears of a dog and the body of a voluptuous human. Over the next few months the studio gradually refined this character, removing the canine features and emphasizing her human form. Replacing Bimbo as star of the Talkartoons, Betty Boop soon became the natural focus of the studio's most creative period.

According to animator Grim Natwick, it was he who created and designed this new character while working on the Talkartoons. "One morning they put on my desk a copy of the 'Boop-Oop-a-Doop' song sung by Helen Kane," he told John Canemaker. "At that time there were no designers and no story men. We virtually wrote our own stories and designed our own characters, then animated them, and so it was with Betty. I'm not even sure she was okayed before I animated her."<sup>55</sup> Helen Kane was then working for Paramount at its studio in Astoria. Paramount had already sent the Fleischers another of its stars, Rudy Vallee (a service it would continue in the future), so the interest in Kane is not surprising. What is unusual is that Fleischer proceeded to copy Kane's distinctive look and sound without bothering to get her permission first. Despite the obvious connections (and Natwick's later admission), Helen Kane lost her lawsuit against the studio when it was revealed that she was not the first boop-oop-a-doop singer in the business.<sup>56</sup> In a final irony, fans now associate this performance style with Mae Questel, who voiced most of the Boop films, and have all but forgotten the music's real innovators.



A pre-Code model sheet specifying face and figure construction of the Fleischer studio's "Betty Boop."

Except for distributor Margaret Winkler, animation in this period was the most restrictive boys' club in the motion picture industry. Women could achieve real power as stars and screenwriters in live-action films, but all significant cartoon producers, directors, and animators were men.<sup>57</sup> Accordingly, this first female cartoon character began as little more than an adolescent dream of sexual availability. This can be seen quite clearly in a film like *Dizzy Red Riding Hood* (December 12, 1931), where Bimbo realizes that Betty, in the title role, "goes for wolves" instead of quiet, unassuming characters like himself. To make the grade, he defeats and skins the local wolf, disguises himself in the pelt, and winds up sharing Grandma's bed with Betty while she sings him a song that would embarrass Mae West. On the other hand, *Bimbo's Initiation* (July 24, 1931) is a nightmarish catalogue of sexual imagery, with Bimbo firmly refusing to join a mysterious hooded fraternity. When his response finally changes from "no" to "yes," his tormentors strip off their robes to reveal a roomful of identical Betty Boops. All ends happily with a mutual spanking session.

As Betty came to dominate the series and Bimbo was reduced to a companion (or possibly even a pet), a more adult approach to the question of cartoon sexuality gradually developed. In *Boop-Oop-a-Doop* (January 16, 1932) she is sexually harassed by her employer, a circus barker, and resists strenuously. By the time Bimbo and Ko-Ko (back from retirement) get around to saving her, she has the situation well in hand. "He couldn't take my boop-oop-a-doop away," she boasts in triumph. *Betty Boop's Big Boss* is even more complex, with Betty blatantly using her sexual powers to edge out a mob of other women for a rare depression-era job. When her new boss begins stroking her breasts and chasing her around the office, army, navy, and air forces rush to her rescue. But Betty, as usual, makes it clear that she knows how to rescue herself. At the end of the film Betty and the boss are again in each other's arms, this time on her terms. *Time on My Hands* (December 23, 1932), though not strictly a Betty Boop subject, features Mae Questel voicing a mermaid version of Betty, complete with fishtail. The underwater fantasy justifies (barely) a completely topless character. To be sure, West Coast cartoons during the pre-Code era had their own share of naughty barnyard humor. But Fleischer's Talkartoons, with their jazzy urban locations, overt sexuality, and voluptuous rendition of female anatomy, demonstrate that the sensibility of a local filmmaking community could be reflected just as clearly in a film produced in New York.

Allusions to the economic depression were not uncommon in New York animation of 1932–1933, and not just at the low-rent Van Beuren studio. In *Betty Boop's Ups and Downs* (October 14, 1932) Betty is forced to leave her home, in front of which we see a large "For Sale" sign. A more distant view reveals the same sign all over town. A still more distant view shows a map of the United States with the same sign. Finally we see the planet Earth spinning in space with its own "For Sale" sign. The Moon auctions off the Earth to the other planets (it goes to Saturn, drawn as a

bizarre caricature of a Jewish peddler or junkman). In *Any Rags?* (January 2, 1932), the reality of economic hardship is seen against the cultural solidarity of an urban community. Bimbo is an “I Cash Clothes” man, walking the streets in search of rags, bones, and bottles. Many views of the city reveal an active social life involving people on the streets and others watching from windows. From her own window, Betty leads the community in a rousing chorus (“Stick out your can, here comes the garbage man”) while the top of her dress keeps falling down, revealing the lacy brassiere underneath.

Because of their association with some of New York’s greatest jazz musicians, the four films in which Betty Boop appeared with Cab Calloway and Louis Armstrong are still frequently revived and reviewed. *I’ll Be Glad When You’re Dead, You Rascal You* (November 25, 1932) suffers from some excruciating racial stereotyping (the movements of Armstrong’s drummer dissolve into those of a cannibal stewing Betty and Ko-Ko in a large pot), but are certainly no worse than the imagery of the live-action version Armstrong made for Paramount a few months earlier. The Calloway trilogy, on the other hand, avoids this problem and uses the transforming quality of animation to allow Betty to interact with Calloway’s on-screen surrogate in scenes of race mixing that were strictly verboten in live-action films at this time.<sup>58</sup> In *Minnie the Moocher* (March 11, 1932) Betty escapes her stifling German-Jewish household and runs off with Bimbo to a haunted cave where Calloway, reconfigured as an amorphous ghoul, performs a largely uncensored version of the title song. *Snow White* (March 31, 1933), nicely described by Norman Klein as “a Coney Island ride into the Underworld,” abruptly abandons its perfunctory narrative as Calloway’s endlessly mutating specter sings “The St. James Infirmary Blues.”<sup>59</sup> In a series of transformations highly characteristic of the New York style, his shape shifts to fit the lyrics: when he sings about a twenty-dollar gold piece, he *becomes* a twenty-dollar gold piece. *The Old Man of the Mountain* (August 4, 1933), the most peculiar of the group, has Betty herself pursuing the priapic title character (“I’m going up to see that old man of the mountain,” she says, as more sensible cartoon characters flee in the opposite direction). The pair then engage in some fancy erotic footwork unique in American screen animation.

In films like these, Fleischer seems to have abandoned any interest in the sort of goal-centered narrative that Disney was developing on the West Coast. As historian Michael Barrier points out regarding *Betty Boop’s Ker-Choo* (January 6, 1933), “Nothing important is happening at the center of the cartoon; the audience is clearly not supposed to care who wins the auto race in which Betty, Bimbo, and Ko-Ko take part, whereas it would be expected to care if the race were between Mickey Mouse and Pegleg Pete. Everything of interest happens around the edges, typically in gags presented in such an offhand way they pass almost without notice.”<sup>60</sup>

The end of this sophisticated and cosmopolitan animation style came very quickly. On one hand, the critical and commercial success of Disney’s Silly Symphonies,



especially *Three Little Pigs* (May 27, 1933), resulted in extraordinary pressure from distributors, who wanted their own cartoon producers to create work of similar narrative power. Fleischer's "offhand" style, in which "everything of interest happens around the edges," began to seem inadequate. Then there was the censorship issue. In the fall of 1933 the Fleischers could look out the window of their studio and see Catholic priests picketing Paramount's Times Square billboard advertising its upcoming Mae West film, *It Ain't No Sin*. ("It Is," read their signs.)<sup>61</sup> Although the industry had been operating under a written censorship code since 1930, no one had been paying much attention. Will Hays had managed to hold off the forces of reform for a few years, but in 1934 the Production Code was strengthened to such a degree that victims would range from Mae West (*It Ain't No Sin*, significantly bowdlerized, would eventually be released as *Belle of the Nineties*) to Betty Boop.

Almost overnight Betty changed from a sexually liberated flapper to a suburban matron, losing her cleavage, her garter, and any glimpse of her underwear. The old Betty was still around in *She Wronged Him Right*, a parody of gaslight melodrama released on January 5, 1934. By the time of *No! No! A Thousand Times No!* (May 24, 1935), a near remake, the character had been entirely desexed. Although the tightening of the Hays Code was not specifically directed at the Fleischers or this one character, the net result was to boost the barnyard critters featured in West Coast cartoons while cutting off New York's one great animation star at the knees (or was that below the knee?).<sup>62</sup> The fact that the Fleischers had already contracted with King Features to make a movie star of Popeye the Sailor was the only thing that kept the studio from closing then and there.<sup>63</sup>

It was a gamble to attempt the adaptation of a newspaper comic strip, a move that suggested the early silent days of Krazy Kat and Mutt and Jeff. But the strong narrative line of Elzie Segar's "Thimble Theater" (where Popeye had been introduced in 1929) complemented the strengths of the Fleischer studio. The films have more plot and dialogue, the characters are less rubbery, the backgrounds are more realistic, and the more "cartoony" elements—the surreal transformations and the casual representation of a community in which human and animal characters participate as equals—are kept to a minimum. These were the features that audiences wanted in the Disney era, and Fleischer's ability to adjust his style to their new demands enabled Popeye to emerge as the top cartoon star of the late 1930s.

As comic strips, the Thimble Theater narratives were sprawling epics that often took months to unfold and involved a host of minor characters. Fleischer instead focused the films on just three major characters and a handful of recurrent plot points. For example, the use of spinach as a magic elixir was insignificant in the strip but would be central to the cartoon series, not only as a fondly anticipated dramatic climax but also as the one excuse for graphic fireworks remaining under the new "realistic" regime. After downing his spinach, Popeye's already inflated biceps

are transformed into anvils, the Rock of Gibraltar, a battleship, or some other icon of strength and invincibility. The Popeye cartoons, which nearly always end in a tremendous beating inflicted by Popeye on one or more villains, would be the first series to incorporate physical violence as a basic structuring element—probably one reason for their long-term success.

Even though the blatant sexuality of the earlier Betty Boop cartoons was no longer permissible, the Popeye series continued to place the male-female relationship at the center of most plots. Popeye and Olive Oyl are trapped in an endless on-again, off-again relationship, inconsistent from one cartoon to the next. Her affections shift arbitrarily from Popeye to Bluto, an all-purpose adversary who had been only a minor character in the strip. Popeye's dogged attachment to the fickle Olive, whose Zasu Pitts mannerisms hardly make her seem a prime catch, expresses something other than conventional love and affection.<sup>64</sup> As William de Mille wrote in 1935, "[Popeye] is fond of his own and ready to protect the weak; but he fights for [Olive] because she is his own; he is protecting his property, not rescuing a loved one."<sup>65</sup> Bluto's interest in Olive is similarly unrelated to conventional movie romance. The sad/funny nature of this triangular relationship is as unique in American screen animation as Betty Boop's direct embrace of sexual pleasure—and another example of East Coast concern for adult themes and situations, even during the worst years of the Hays Code.

Graphically, the Popeye series was able to integrate the best elements of West Coast and East Coast style. "These cartoons make better use of the full black-and-white spectrum than any others in film history," notes animation historian Leonard Maltin. Leslie Cabarga, in his study of the Fleischer studio, finds the new approach to have reinforced the most characteristic elements of the local style: "The urban quality of the Talkartoons is even more evident in Popeye. Somehow, the grey ink-wash backgrounds seem to me as rich and colorful as if they had been done in Technicolor. The bright black and white cartoon characters contrast strongly with the gritty old stone pavements and worn down buildings."<sup>66</sup> Although focusing on the life of a sailor, the Popeye series is largely tied to the same urban spaces as Betty Boop and *Out of the Inkwell*. In *A Dream Walking* (September 26, 1934), Popeye and Bluto compete to rescue the sleepwalking Olive, who wanders across the tops of skyscrapers and out onto the bare girders of a midtown construction site. The film is frequently cited for its elegant perspective tricks, but the dream motif is also classic Fleischer. (Betty Boop's *Red Hot Mama*, a dream vision of Hell released on February 2, 1934, makes use of the same tune, a Mack Gordon–Harry Revel standard.)

Mae Questel, the voice of Betty Boop, was also Olive Oyl. After a few false starts, Popeye was voiced by Jack Mercer, an artist on the studio staff. The almost constant stream of dialogue in the Popeye cartoons was added after the animation was completed, not the other way around, as preferred on the West Coast. Exact

synchronization of lip movement was never a goal, and this approach allowed Mercer considerable freedom for the mumbled asides that became a hallmark of the series (an equivalent of the verbal scatting found in 1930s jazz vocals). Popeye's peculiar accent also marked him as less a sailor and more a product of the urban tenements, a quality emphasized in the titles of many of the films (*Axe Me Another*, *Hospitaliky*, *Learn Polikeness*) and in the signature refrain, "I yam what I yam."

One of the clearest examples of the way in which the Fleischer studio moved to imitate the Disney style can be seen in the introduction of the "Color Classics" series in 1934. The first release, Betty Boop in *Poor Cinderella* (August 3), completely abandoned the narrative riffs and nightmarish graphics of *Snow White* in favor of a linear condensation of the familiar plot—an illustration rather than an impression. This choice may have played to Disney's strengths, but had nothing to do with the best qualities of the Fleischer studio. "They never seemed to appreciate the special quality of their cartoons which was absent from Disney's whitewashed fantasies," Cabarga notes. "Dave Fleischer told me recently that he had always wished that he could produce cartoons as beautiful as Disney's."<sup>67</sup> Later Color Classics were even less memorable.

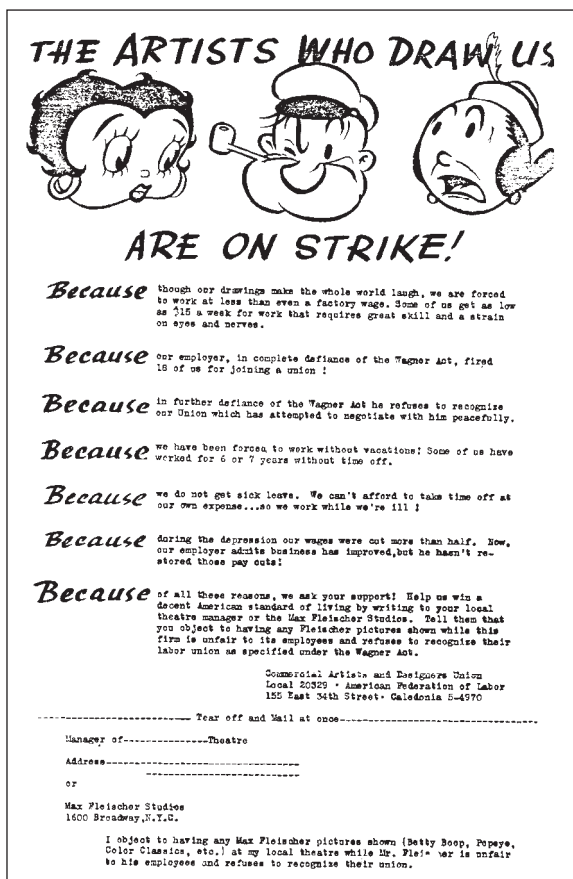
Nevertheless, at the end of 1936 Fleischer released a two-reel Technicolor cartoon that suggested a way in which "beautiful" animation might be used while still maintaining the energy of its own films. *Popeye the Sailor Meets Sindbad the Sailor* (November 27) has been cited by Mark Langer as "possibly the most spectacular cartoon made up to that time."<sup>68</sup> The film dropped the Popeye characters into the Arabian Nights adventure without losing their own idiosyncratic personalities. The following year's *Popeye the Sailor Meets Ali Baba's Forty Thieves* (November 26, 1937) was even more impressive, making full use of Fleischer's patented "Stereoptical" technique for incorporating a detailed, three-dimensional model as the background for his animation cels. "When Popeye walks through the jewel-filled cave of Sindbad . . . one can hardly believe one's eyes," Maltin writes. "The illusion of three dimensions is quite vivid."<sup>69</sup>

Here again, the differences between Fleischer and Disney are revealing. Where Disney's Multi-Plane camera device created an illusion of depth within the animated world, Fleischer's tabletop system actually emphasized the flatness of the animated figures, which float like the cartoon characters they are before the three-dimensional relief of their backgrounds.<sup>70</sup> Released a month before Disney's *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, Fleischer's *Ali Baba* was a brief triumph for East Coast animation—funny as well as beautiful, and still somehow bearing all the hallmarks of an ordinary Popeye one-reeler ("Open sez me," the sailor demands of his spinach can). It could have been a model for the studio's subsequent move into features, but Fleischer, and Paramount, chose to look elsewhere.

Ironically, *Popeye the Sailor Meets Ali Baba's Forty Thieves* was produced in the midst of the worst labor action in the history of the East Coast motion picture

industry, a five-month strike that poisoned the working atmosphere at Fleischer's shop and would lead to the disintegration of the entire theatrical animation business in New York.<sup>71</sup> Although the animators and department heads at the Fleischer studio had always been paid well, less skilled workers were earning as little as \$17.40 per week. The American Federation of Labor's Commercial Artists and Designers Union (CADU) had begun to organize these workers when complaints over salary and working conditions mounted following the closing of the Van Beuren studio in 1936, an event that tended to depress salaries throughout the local industry. Max Fleischer was a paternalistic employer who spent considerable personal time with his workers; but, like all other studio heads, he was no friend of organized labor. Although CADU was not supported by the majority of animators and their assistants, the union still sought recognition from Fleischer during the spring of 1937. Fleischer resisted, and after he fired fifteen of their members, CADU called a strike on May 7, 1937.

Although few animators were union members, most were intimidated by CADU's raucous picket line, at least in the beginning. Strikers marched up and



A flier handed out by members of the Commercial Artists and Designers Union picketing the Fleischer studio during the fateful 1937 strike. Courtesy of Harvey Deneroff.

down in front of 1600 Broadway, chanting "I'm Popeye the union man" and carrying signs that read, "We Can't Get Much Spinach on Salaries as Low as \$15.00 a Week" and "Nudist Betty? How Can I Dress on Max Fleischer's Pay?" Some pickets were arrested after scuffling with police, and another group mistakenly stink-bombed Dave Fleischer's home in the belief that his brother Max lived there. Strikers planted in the Paramount Theatre jeered their own work with cries of "Get that scab picture off the screen!" A call for other theaters to boycott Fleischer's films was said to have had some success.

The strike dragged on all summer and into the fall, finally reaching a compromise resolution on October 13. By then, the personal dynamic at the studio had changed completely. "After the strike Max retreated into his office," remembered animator Orestes Calpini. "The *Animated News* [house paper] stopped and the family feeling was gone."<sup>72</sup> Fleischer had been pleading poverty all during the strike. Then, on January 21, 1938, he made the startling announcement that he intended to build a new 32,000-square-foot air-conditioned studio in Miami. Although some theatrical animation would continue in New York for decades, this decision marked the end of the city's role as a major player in the American animation industry. And with live-action production now limited to a handful of ethnic features and musical shorts, the loss of the Fleischer studio was also a tremendous blow to the city's self-image as the nation's alternative film capital.

Again, Disney's success had cast a long shadow. After the opening of *Snow White* in December 1937, Paramount insisted that Fleischer also produce an animated feature. To continue production of shorts while creating this feature would require a tremendous amount of studio space, which, even in 1938, was more expensive in New York than elsewhere. When cartoon producers did leave New York, as Charles Mintz did in 1930, they headed for Hollywood. So why did Fleischer choose Miami? In addition to the fact that Max owned a vacation home there, Miami had aggressively pursued him with a program of business incentives. And at a time when even Hollywood was hearing the rumble of union activity, Florida's notorious hostility to organized labor was legendary. With the staff expanding from 175 workers in New York to 650 in Miami, the need to keep wages down suddenly became a prime concern.<sup>73</sup>

Even so, Florida was hardly an ideal location. There were no equipment houses or laboratories and no pool of acting talent for vocal performance (Mae Questel refused to leave New York). Moreover, the Fleischer studio was one of the only animation houses owned and largely staffed by Jews. In Miami, however, many apartment owners still posted signs advising, "No Dogs or Jews Allowed." Although Max Fleischer convinced one African American couple who worked for him in New York to relocate to Miami, he could never find adequate housing for them and eventually tried to send them back to New York after observing the shocking treatment they endured at a local hospital.<sup>74</sup> At the same time, relations between the transplanted

New Yorkers and the new employees hired away from Hollywood animation studios were strained. The Hollywood contingent felt that they represented the successful wing of the animation industry, while the New Yorkers suspected that these new recruits were largely second-raters rejected by Disney, Warners, and the other West Coast studios.

On December 22, 1939, Fleischer's Miami group released its first feature film, *Gulliver's Travels*. One of the top-grossing films of 1939–1940 (quite an accomplishment), it proved a financial disappointment because of the wartime loss of European markets.<sup>75</sup> "It was necessary in making *Gulliver's Travels* to ship all film to Hollywood for developing and printing," the *New York Times* reported, "and the Fleischers had to come here [Los Angeles] to complete the picture, spending almost one-third of their budget outside Miami!"<sup>76</sup> Drawing on his considerable experience with top vocal talent, Fleischer promoted the use of popular radio and recording stars Lanny Ross and Jessica Dragonette as the voices of Gulliver and Princess Glory, a strategy that would soon become obligatory for animated features. But as far as the critics were concerned, *Gulliver* was no *Pinocchio*, the Disney film Paramount was trying to beat into the marketplace.

A subsequent feature, *Mr. Bug Goes to Town*, was released on December 4, 1941, a few days before the Pearl Harbor attack. The first animated feature not based on a preexisting classic, *Mr. Bug* was the story of an insect colony forced to relocate from its comfortable home in New York. In a happy ending, they establish new quarters atop an enormous modernistic skyscraper, providing ample opportunity for dazzling cityscapes and bug's-eye views of modern urban living. But with even Disney's features losing money, there was little hope for *Mr. Bug*, and Paramount pulled the plug on the studio, which it controlled and financed. The last films supervised by the Fleischers were the first episodes of "Superman," a fabulously expensive dramatic cartoon series that celebrated the city of Metropolis as much as its most famous inhabitant. Finally, in what many suggest was an illegal operation, Paramount removed Max and Dave Fleischer and appointed Seymour Kneitel, Max's son-in-law, as head of production.<sup>77</sup> Paramount reduced the staff, changed the name of the operation to Famous Studios, and eventually brought everyone back to New York.



The entrance to the Hearst *Metrotone* News offices, 450 West 54th Street, in 1938. *Fox Movietone News* and Louis de Rochemont's *March of Time* were both at number 460 next door. Bison Archives.



# 10

## Film and Reality

### The Moving Picture Newspaper

Almost from the moment they were introduced, feature-length films held the central position in any discussion of “the movies.” Indeed, for critics and audiences alike, these extended narrative fictions *were* the movies, and every other format or genre was eventually relegated to the margins. Animated cartoons occupied one extreme, where time and space were imaginatively manipulated and the laws of gravity and narrative logic did not apply. At the opposite pole was a motley collection of newsreels, documentaries, travelogues, and industrial films that represented the “nonfiction” end of the business. East Coast filmmakers had dominated the cartoon market through the 1920s and, at least until the Fleischer strike, were able to hold their own against West Coast competition well into the 1930s. But as far as nonfiction film was concerned, Hollywood was never a contender.<sup>1</sup>

The early cinema had been dominated by nonfiction subjects, especially during the Spanish-American War. But by the time of the nickelodeon, the growing popularity of narrative comedies and melodramas had marginalized the entire nonfiction sector. Gathering nonfiction material into a separate weekly release was one way of salvaging what remained of this business, but the catch-as-catch-can format of these early reels failed to help them compete with the innovative fiction films being produced in great numbers in the United States and abroad. Pathé introduced America’s first weekly “moving picture newspaper” in 1911, working from its new studio at 1 Congress Street in Jersey City. *The Pathé Weekly* was soon followed by competing reels from Vitagraph, Gaumont, Universal, and other early producers, but these releases all lacked editorial focus.

William Randolph Hearst, whose impact on both cartoons and feature films has already been discussed, now began to play an even more significant role in transforming the quintessential nonfiction genre, the newsreel. Hearst had involved his news operations in the motion picture field as early as 1898, when he shipped the Edison company's cameramen to Cuba on his own yacht. In 1914 his International News Service joined with the Selig Polyscope Company to create the *Hearst-Selig News Pictorial*, an affiliation that he soon transferred to Vitagraph, then Pathé. In keeping with the synergistic cross-promotion already characteristic of his media empire, "the Hearst newspapers in the various cities began to carry advertising on the Hearst-Pathé News on a scale hitherto unknown."<sup>2</sup> Hearst soon broke with Pathé and moved to Universal, then, in 1927, to MGM. Where earlier newsreels had no more organization than the average vaudeville program, Hearst imposed the regimen of a metropolitan daily. As in the city room of any aggressive modern broadsheet, a managing editor ruled over a series of area specialists responsible for local news, international news, sports, and fashion. Instead of depending on whatever material came in that week, the managing editor set the tone of the newsreel by organizing coverage (the week's hottest news was always the lead) and marshaling a staff of cameramen whose exploits were promoted as heavily as those of any print journalist.<sup>3</sup>

Emmanuel Cohen, editor of the *Pathé News* and then, from 1926, the *Paramount News* (and subsequently head of production at the Signal Corps Photographic Center during World War II), divided potential newsreel subjects into three areas.<sup>4</sup> First were scheduled events like beauty pageants or coronations, where coverage could be planned in advance and individual staff members assigned specific tasks or locations. Next were predictable events, which for Cohen included war or labor conflict. Cameramen could be sent to cover a threatened battle, but exactly how things might develop was largely open to chance. In such cases, footage might have to be obtained from "stringers," local photographers lucky enough to have been in the right place at the right time. Sudden events, including earthquakes and dirigible disasters, were the most highly valued of all newsreel subjects, but also the least amenable to editorial control.<sup>5</sup>

These subjects might seem little different from those to be found in conventional newspapers, but in covering them the newsreel editor was at a significant disadvantage. Unlike the *New York Times*, which was free to report any event known to its staff, the *Paramount News* needed ownership of actual footage, a situation that resulted in brutal competition among newsreel companies for unique visual "scoops." There was no allowance for the reel that failed to cover that week's train wreck or royal visit. Until at least the mid-1930s, newsreel coverage was all about speed and exclusivity; analysis was nonexistent, and editorial positions, although clearly inscribed in the content and style of each reel, were never presented or identified as opinionated commentary.

During this period most literature devoted to the motion picture industry typically described a team effort designed to support “the story.” But books about the newsreel business, at least those published before 1941, were filled with macho anecdotes celebrating the exploits of fearless cameramen.<sup>6</sup> (Buster Keaton’s New York project, *The Cameraman* [1929], also plays with this mythology.) The focus was not a community of filmmakers but the sort of lone-wolf city reporter typically played on stage or screen by someone like Lee Tracy. It made little difference whether he was dodging shot and shell at the front or sabotaging rival teams by flashing sunlight into their lenses with the aid of a pocket mirror.<sup>7</sup> Denying victory to the competition was the name of the game, a contest often taken to bizarre extremes. In 1923 Pathé arranged for exclusive rights to a big horse race at Belmont Park, just across the New York City line. Knowing that dozens of rival cameramen would be planted in and around the stands, ready to “pirate” the finish with telephoto lenses or handheld cameras tucked beneath their trench coats, the Pathé team not only attempted to blind the competition with the usual array of mirrors but set off one hundred smoke pots to obscure the view and called in a crop-dusting plane to lay down a smoke screen over the entire track.<sup>8</sup>

Although scoops rushed in from distant and exotic locations made for the best stories in the memoirs of newsreel cameramen, a disproportionate amount of footage in any newsreel was typically shot within commuting distance of New York. Every company had some ability to cover events in the major American cities and key foreign markets, but it took time to bring in this footage (especially in the days before regular air travel), and little of consequence seemed to be happening west of the Rockies, in any case. The prospects for covering “scheduled” or “predictable” events—major league baseball games or presidential visits, for example—dropped significantly west of the Mississippi. The isolation that made California attractive as a factory town for the production of feature films also meant that it would be largely ignored by newsreel producers and, by extension, the rest of the nonfiction business.

Like the news services with which they maintained an uneasy relationship, the newsreel producers were all located in the East—specifically, in New York City. After World War I (which provided a great boost for nonfiction film in general), four major newsreels dominated the market: *Fox News*, edited by Truman Talley, operating out of the Fox studio building on West 55th Street; *Kinograms*, edited by Terry Ramsaye and distributed by Educational, at 120 West 41st Street; Hearst’s *International News*, distributed by Universal but with offices at 281 William Street, in the heart of the city’s historic newspaper district; and *Pathé News*, edited by Emmanuel Cohen from new quarters in the Pathé Building at 35 West 45th Street.

The results of this geographic concentration were predictable. As much as the newsreel industry loved to boast of its national and international scope, the fact remains that it was easier to cover the Miss America Pageant in Atlantic City than the



Tournament of Roses Parade in Pasadena. Industry analyst Homer Croy reported as early as 1918 that, “[w]ith the growing interest in news films, plans were matured to widen the scope of the news departments so that all the happenings depicted might not be from New York City.”<sup>9</sup> This expansion did occur to some degree, but New York remained the location of choice for all newsreel producers, and New York characters like Mayor Jimmy Walker, “Babe” Ruth, and Governor Al Smith were accorded far more newsreel coverage than local celebrities from Chicago or San Francisco. The situation was even recognized in academic circles: in an analysis of the content of motion pictures, published in 1935, sociologist Edgar Dale placed “life of the upper economic strata” and “Metropolitan localities” at the top of a list of subjects that “have received attention, sometimes excessive” in the newsreels.<sup>10</sup> To a large extent, the image of New York as the preeminent metropolis of the twentieth century was created through the presence there of the nation’s only center of newsreel production.

During the silent era newsreels were almost impossible to avoid: by 1927, 90 percent of American theaters were screening at least one newsreel every day.<sup>11</sup> At the same time, audiences were deluged with an array of other nonfiction films, many of which they encountered not just in movie theaters, but also in schools, at organized social gatherings, and even in the workplace. Seldom advertised and almost never reviewed, these films left few traces to mark their existence. But along with the higher-profile newsreel operations, they played a significant role in supporting the motion picture industry in the East during the difficult interwar period and would greatly influence the style of New York’s documentary-inflected feature-film industry in the postwar era.

### Screen Magazines

In 1915 Paramount introduced a weekly educational miscellany that it described as a “magazine reel.” Clearly intended as a high-concept competitor to its rivals’ more journalistic releases, the *Paramount Pictographs* were edited by the noted war correspondent Edward Lyell Fox. According to Paramount’s publicity office, the result was “the first, real, insistent, consistent, connected, continuous attempt ever made to utilize the motion picture for a purpose for which it is pre-eminently fitted, that of molding public opinion and placing before the masses of people the advanced views of the best thinkers and writers of the world, in such a way that they can be easily understood and readily appreciated.”<sup>12</sup>

Departments were managed by celebrity intellectuals well known in the pages of the era’s great general-interest magazines, including zoologist Raymond L. Ditmars, statistician Roger Babson, Vassar geology professor George B. Shattuck, and Walde-mar Kaempffert, editor of *Popular Science Monthly*. Marie Montessori hosted a regular

"Better Babies" feature, and the "Testing Your Mind" series by Harvard professor Hugo Munsterberg introduced concepts of modern psychology to a mass audience.<sup>13</sup> Despite these gems, much of the reel was devoted to conventional industrial film footage or government "preparedness" subjects. According to Arthur Edwin Krows, "the sponsors were speedily discouraged to learn that their output was not noticeably better than competitive releases already established in the market."<sup>14</sup>

Within a year, Paramount contracted with animator J. R. Bray to take over the series, which was renamed *Paramount-Bray-Pictographs* and produced at Bray's studio at 23 East 26th Street. The real work was handled by a creative team of young filmmakers, including Earl Hurd, J. F. Leventhal, Jack Norling, and Max and Dave Fleischer. The new series dropped the most obviously sponsored material and increased the emphasis on cartoon episodes featuring Col. Heeza Liar, Bobby Bumps, and other Bray characters. For example, the May 14, 1916, release consisted of a preparedness subject (Frederick Palmer on "The Great Need of Our Army"), "How to Raise Chickens," a Bray cartoon called *Fisherman's Luck*, and "Character Building," one of the Montessori Better Babies series. By May 28, 1917, a year after Bray had taken over the series (and a month after America entered the war), the reel included "Trawling for Snappers," "The Ukalele [*sic*] Builders," "The American Girl Athlete," and *Bobby Bumps, Day-Light Camper*, a cartoon by Earl Hurd.<sup>15</sup> Bray's use of "animated blue prints" for this series, in which mechanical processes were illustrated through single-frame animation of articulated models or diagrams (notably in *The Elements of the Automobile*), was a major step in the development of the motion picture as an educational tool.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, the informational content of the various screen magazines, haphazard as they may have been, clearly prepared both filmmakers and audiences for the great age of the documentary to follow.

Although Bray's new format was not quite as didactic as Paramount's original approach, it was still too dry for most theatrical audiences. In 1920 Bray moved the *Pictographs* to Goldwyn, where they finally expired. Bray's studio continued to keep one foot in the theatrical cartoon business and the other in the industrial film market until it closed in 1927. Its peculiar mixture of cartoon animation, stop motion, and live-action footage, developed through commissions with government agencies and private industry, proved crucial to the work of many later New York animators, especially the Fleischer brothers.

### New York as a Nontheatrical Center

The tremendous increase in government sponsorship of nonfiction film during World War I led to a false sense of optimism among New York producers, who were suffering from the recent decline in theatrical production. In August 1920, for example, Harry Levey took over the three-story Bacon-Backer studio at 230 West



38th Street with the intention of creating the largest studio in the country devoted solely to business and educational films.<sup>17</sup> He immediately began production on *Uncle Sam of Freedom Ridge*, a pro-League of Nations dramatic feature intended for screening at Democratic Party rallies. One of the more bizarre political subjects of the era, the film reaches its climax with the suicide of the title character in protest against the Senate's rejection of the League.<sup>18</sup> More typical were *The Porcelain Lamp*, a sponsored film promoting automobiles, and *A Modern Aladdin*, on electricity.<sup>19</sup> On the other hand, government interest in sponsored film production dropped to almost nothing immediately after the war. By June 1921, when Levey won a rare contract to produce *How to Prepare and Mail a Letter*, he had already leased his own studio to Hugo Ballin for the production of conventional features.<sup>20</sup>

To some degree, the educational market picked up where the government left off. School systems had already made considerable use of films sponsored by the Department of Agriculture, the U.S. Public Health Service, and other government agencies. "The schools of New York City were the first in which the use of film actually conformed to the course of studies," one textbook noted in 1923, "and such of the New York schools as are thus using films pedagogically are setting a pace and a standard for other schools of the country."<sup>21</sup> What started in the East spread quickly across the country, the first of many technological fixes seized on by American education. According to another industry source, the number of schools and churches equipped for motion picture projection in 1923 "almost equals the number of theatres." Added to this number were seven thousand hospitals and charitable institutions and practically every penal institution in the country.<sup>22</sup> Indeed, no less an authority than William Jennings Bryan told the New York Visual Instruction Agency that "[t]he motion picture is the greatest educational institution that man has known and it won't be long before every school in the country will use motion pictures because there isn't anything good that can not be taught by films."<sup>23</sup> Nevertheless, the expense and difficulty of handling 35mm film, even on non-inflammable diacetate stock, proved a hurdle that would not be overcome until the nontheatrical industry adopted 16mm film as its standard.

William Fox had always considered the educational/industrial market a potential gold mine, and as early as 1922 he established a special nontheatrical division to service it. In 1926 Courtland Smith, once president of the American News Association and later an assistant to Will Hays, was placed in charge of the entire operation. He reinvigorated Fox's educational program with a series of "Fox Hours"—classroom films, complete with study guides, devoted to geography, civics, and nature studies. Smith soon incorporated sound into these subjects, a feat that very much interested Harley Clarke, "one time wizard of the Society For Visual Education," who replaced William Fox as president of the parent company in April 1930.<sup>24</sup>

With the cooperation of President Herbert Hoover's administration, Clarke engineered a widely publicized test of the efficacy of educational talking films in

Washington in July 1931. Students from all over the country were shown films like *Toads* and *Monarch Butterflies*, accompanied by recorded lectures or expert classroom “chalk talks.” “The general conclusions were that sound pictures were twice as effective as silent ones.” The Fox Hour subjects were soon replaced by an ambitious “Movietone School Series” produced by Fox in New York in collaboration with educators from around the country.<sup>25</sup> The market for these films, even during the worst years of the depression, was surprisingly resilient. The American Museum of Natural History, which circulated a wide range of educational subjects, saw the number of individual borrowers using its materials increase by 500 percent from 1928 to 1932. The museum shipped nearly 27,000 reels of film in 1932, and even then “found it necessary to refuse more than 50 per cent of the applications” because of the limited number of prints on hand.<sup>26</sup>

The difference between Fox’s approach to the educational market and that of its competitors was evident in the studio’s constant search for ways in which this material could cross over into its mainstream business. In 1929 Fox acquired the Embassy Theatre, the smallest of the Broadway first-run houses, and devoted it entirely to Movietone newsreels. The Embassy successfully operated under this policy until 1934, when it was taken over by Newsreel Theaters, Inc., which programmed reels from all producers.

A rival news theater, the Trans-Lux, opened a few blocks away in 1931. A radical departure in exhibition policy, Trans-Lux was the creation of Courtland Smith, now working on his own, and another ex-Fox staffer, Jack Connolly. Audiences paid a low admission price to enter a small (158-seat) auditorium, where a thirty- to forty-five-minute newsreel program was screened continuously. Rear-screen projection allowed the entire operation to occupy a space no larger than a conventional storefront. Both Trans-Lux and Embassy soon operated small chains across the country, locating their theaters not only in entertainment districts, but also near railroad waiting rooms and downtown shopping centers.<sup>27</sup> Newsreel theaters offered niche audiences the opportunity to sample nonfiction material at will, prefiguring the later success of “all news” broadcasting.

### Scenics and Travelogues

The collapse of the theatrical screen magazine format had left only one profitable non-news genre in the nonfiction market: travelogues and scenics. These films were heir to a tradition of armchair tourism dating back to nineteenth-century lantern slides and the early cinema’s programs of exotic “vues.”<sup>28</sup> Filmed versions of exotic exploration were especially popular after the tremendous box-office success of *Paul J. Rainey’s African Hunt*, distributed by Universal in 1912. Even though their subjects, almost by definition, were filmed in exotic and far-off locations,

most of these films were produced, assembled, and distributed out of New York. In 1923 Charles Urban's "Popular Classics" series, distributed by Vitagraph and produced by Urban at his headquarters in Irvington-on-Hudson, offered such titles as *Plant Life* and *Silvery Salmon*. Prizma titles, distributed to the states rights market from its offices at 110 West 40th Street (and the only all-color series available anywhere), included *Oases of the Desert* and *In the Land of the Incas*. Adventurers Robert Bruce, Burton Holmes, and Martin Johnson all had scenic reels of their own in the market.<sup>29</sup>

Johnson was the most active of these producers during the interwar period. Unlike adventurers who brought along camera crews to document their exploits, Johnson and his wife, Osa, designed their expeditions primarily as motion picture projects. The links they established with George Eastman, the American Museum of Natural History, and the Pathescope nontheatrical film library were intended to support, legitimize, and maximize the circulation of their films (the model still works for Public Television's nature documentaries today). "For a while in the 1920s," Kevin Brownlow notes, "it seemed as if Mr. and Mrs. Martin Johnson had a copyright on the African continent."<sup>30</sup> Yet, even if their films were shot on location, editing (and later scoring) of films like *Simba* was done in New York and New Jersey studios.<sup>31</sup> Indeed, other filmmakers working in this tradition not only edited their films in New York, but actually shot inserts and introductory material there. Merian C. Cooper, producer of *Grass*, admitted that "the shots that open the picture were taken by a rock behind Paramount's Astoria studio."<sup>32</sup> Astoria also appeared in Karl Brown's *Stark Love*, otherwise shot on location in the Appalachian Mountains.<sup>33</sup> The makers of *With Byrd at the South Pole*, *Rango*, *The Silent Enemy*, *The Viking*, and many others shot their narrative sequences in New York, where all postproduction was handled.<sup>34</sup>

The greatest of these exotic location films was also, in a way, a New York production. "There have been many fine travel pictures, many gorgeous 'scenics,' but there has been only one that deserves to be called great," Robert Sherwood wrote in 1923. "That one is *Nanook of the North*."<sup>35</sup> Robert Flaherty edited *Nanook* in New York in the winter of 1921–1922 and eventually signed with Pathé after screening the work print for every major distributor in the city. The film made his reputation and is still considered the progenitor of the American documentary tradition—a term not in use until 1926. At the time of its original release, however, *Nanook of the North* was hailed (and not just by Sherwood) as merely the latest and best example of an already well-established subgenre, the scenic. Flaherty was too idiosyncratic to ever be clearly identified with any local documentary tradition. Yet, as a man who hated Hollywood with a passion, he certainly preferred to do his editing, scoring, and drinking in New York, and he would be a fixture of the local documentary scene until his death in 1951.<sup>36</sup>

Local filmmakers had often turned New York City itself into the subject of occasional scenic essays, and Charles Post Mason even produced an early feature, *Greater New York by Day and by Night: The Wonder City of the World* as early as 1916.<sup>37</sup> But by the end of the war the straightforward approach of the early cinema's "actualities" was obsolete. With audiences continuing to yawn at the average educational subject, even scenics needed a makeover, and the result was a series of artfully styled documentaries described by later historians as "city symphonies." Today such films are never discussed in relation to the scenic genre but instead are grouped by historians as one branch of the cinematic avant-garde of the 1920s and 1930s.<sup>38</sup> Flaherty himself produced such a reel in 1927, *The Twenty-four Dollar Island*, "a film in which New York is the central character," photographed with telephoto lenses from various skyscrapers in and around the city.<sup>39</sup> A similar film, *Manhatta*, had been produced by Paul Strand and Charles Sheeler in 1921, nominally inspired by Walt Whitman's poetry but more evocative of Strand's early *Camera Work* photography.<sup>40</sup> Local audiences saw these films the way they would any other scenics, as part of the program accompanying the feature presentation at the Rialto and the Roxy.<sup>41</sup>

In 1928 Walther Ruttmann's *Berlin, Symphony of a Great City* had its American premiere at the Fifth Avenue Playhouse, one of the nation's first art house cinemas. Writing in the *New York Times*, Mordaunt Hall felt that he had seen this sort of urban modernism before. Ruttmann's film was only another version of "what Robert J. Flaherty tried to do with his film, *The Twenty-four Dollar Island*."<sup>42</sup> *Berlin* was followed by Dziga Vertov's *The Man with a Movie Camera*, another film seen (correctly or not) as recording "a day in the life" of a great modern city. An even more sophisticated work, Vertov's film opened at the Film Guild Cinema, another Greenwich Village art house, in September 1929.

Although films like these were rarely shown outside of New York, they clearly impressed local cameramen, both amateur and professional, who haunted such theaters looking for evidence of the latest European styles. Robert Florey, then working in New York under contract to Paramount, screened his avant-garde *Skyscraper Symphony* at the Little Carnegie as early as August 1929. By 1931 similar projects, produced independently by men working in and around the New York motion picture industry, were all over town. Irving Browning's *City of Contrasts* may have been the most widely promoted at the time, but it was hardly alone.<sup>43</sup> Herman G. Weinberg (then a film critic and theater manager) produced *A City Symphony* that same year. Jay Leyda, who was writing for many of the same journals as Weinberg and hoping to create a film that would convince Sergei Eisenstein to take him on as an apprentice, made *A Bronx Morning*. Both films were screened only to specialized audiences, and even then with limited success.<sup>44</sup>

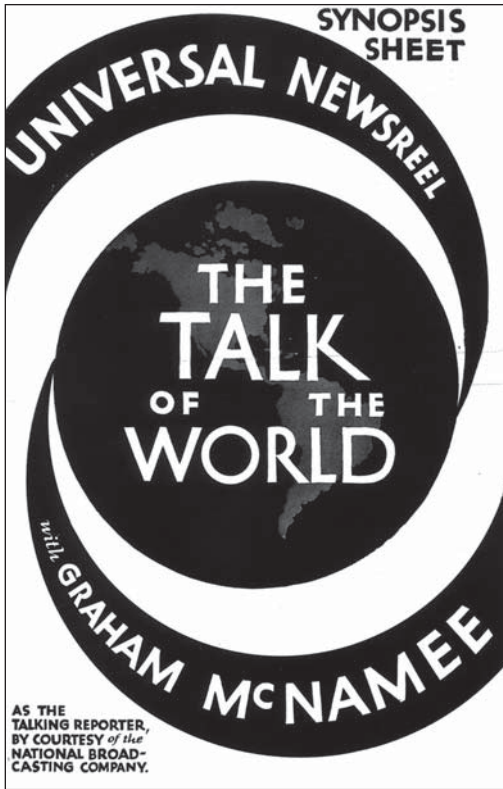
The same models also influenced more traditional subjects released by the major producers. Vitaphone's *Rhythms of a Big City*, Fox Movietone's *Manhattan Medley*,

Pathé's *Shadows* (a "cinema fantasy" shot underneath the elevated tracks), and even Burton Holmes's *Up and Down New York* all presented the city in an array of "impressionistic" non-narrative styles.<sup>45</sup> There was even a parody of sorts, *Sightseeing in New York* (Picture Classics), in which wise-cracking Italian dialect comedians Nick Basil and Tony Martin take tourists around town with the aid of considerable stock footage.<sup>46</sup> Lewis Jacobs discussed some of these films (not all) in his seminal 1947 essay, "Experimental Cinema in America."<sup>47</sup> It is interesting to note that while Jacobs identified avant-garde film production in cities all over the country, by his account only New York filmmakers made city symphonies.<sup>48</sup>

### The Eyes and Ears of the World

The introduction of sound in 1927 helped turn the animated cats and mice of the silent screen into amusing and believable comic actors and transformed the cartoon business from a freak screen attraction into an attractive and profitable sideshow. The effect on nonfiction cinema was almost as powerful. The reason was not that audiences were fascinated by political speeches and man-in-the-street interviews, both of which were hampered by technological limitations until well after World War II. Instead, the real talk in the talking newsreel came from the announcer's booth. Commentators like Graham McNamee (Universal), Lowell Thomas (Movietone), and Edwin C. Hill (Metrotone) soon replaced the daredevil cameraman in the public imagination. Their commentaries were redolent of radio style, which immediately gave them a timely and fashionable edge. But they also recalled (no doubt unintentionally) the use of live commentators by many early cinema exhibitors. Narrative intelligibility had been a great problem in that period, and until film stylists like Porter and Griffith taught the silent film to speak for itself, many theaters felt the need of a professional explainer to help it along. Indeed, some historians speculate that fiction films began to outpace nonfiction cinema after the turn of the century largely because they developed comprehensible narrative arcs, a trick that nonfiction filmmakers took years to figure out. Whether this commentary supported the visuals or even contradicted them, the appeal to both eye and ear was far more compelling than any silent news film. And with news films now able to tell audiences exactly how they should respond to images of strikes, military preparations, or the everyday events of modern life, the ability to "mold public opinion," Paramount's goal as far back as 1915, could now become a reality.

The *Steamboat Willie* effect actually hit the newsreel industry first, when audiences at the Roxy saw and heard Fox Movietone's coverage of Charles Lindbergh taking off from Roosevelt Field. "The roar of the motor when it starts and the following mechanical stutterings and stammerings as the engine begins to drag its



Cover of a synopsis sheet distributed to exhibitors of the Universal Newsreel in 1933. Note the prominence given to NBC newscaster Graham McNamee.

load thrilled everybody in the house,” *Variety* reported in June 1927, months before the opening of *The Jazz Singer*.<sup>49</sup> Both Paramount and MGM started newsreels of their own, with Hearst producing the MGM reel as well as Universal’s.<sup>50</sup> MGM and Paramount, which aspired to fill all their customers’ program needs through a “full service contract” of features and shorts, were pushed into the newsreel business through economic necessity. “There seems to be a general unanimity of opinion that while other short subjects such as comedies may be used to supplement the feature picture, the newsreel must be used,” one industry analyst noted in 1933. Unfortunately, the jump from four newsreel companies to six had the unfortunate effect of flooding the market and depressing prices, turning the newsreel business in general from a profit center to a loss leader.<sup>51</sup>

Although *Kinograms*, the weakest of the national newsreels, soon disappeared, it is unlikely that business was quite so bad for the remaining five companies. Universal, for example, continued to turn a tidy profit on its reel even after Paramount and MGM entered the field. On an annual basis, Universal’s modest newsreel operation regularly grossed over \$1 million, even during the worst years of the depression. Always returning at least two-and-a-half times its production cost, it remained a



dependable income generator at a time when the poor performance of Universal's feature films consistently forced the company into the red.<sup>52</sup>

At the other end of the spectrum was Fox Movietone News, the largest and most ambitious of all the news operations. Fox Movietone was located not in the main studio building but at 460 West 54th Street, where E. I. Sponable had installed the first Fox-Case sound equipment in 1926. Until October 1934 both the Movietone and the Metrotone newsreels were produced there, at which point Hearst moved his operation into its own offices.<sup>53</sup> A 1931 assignment sheet lists forty two-man crews scattered over eleven countries, including three teams in Berlin and four in Paris. There were eleven crews working out of New York, two in Washington, and two in Los Angeles, typical of the concentration on New York City evident since newsreels had begun.<sup>54</sup> By 1940 Fox had cameramen in fifty-one countries.<sup>55</sup>

As newsreels became more disciplined (and influential) with the coming of sound, they lost the aura of intrepid individualism characteristic of the silent era. Instead of the real action being in the field with the cameramen, the editors back in the home office were now firmly in control. The shift resulted in more thoughtful and comprehensive coverage, but a certain sameness also crept into the content of the reels. "One gets the impression from these newsreels that very little inventiveness and ingenuity are utilized in their construction," Edgar Dale wrote in 1935. "They are made according to a formula which, as far as the writer can determine from his own experience, has changed little in the last fifteen years."<sup>56</sup>

The *Hindenberg* disaster of May 6, 1937, was the most dramatic of local newsreel scoops. Cameramen later returned to Lakehurst, New Jersey, to film the wreckage. Museum of the Moving Image.



Raymond Fielding, whose history of the newsreel is still the most comprehensive, identifies three causes of this “decline.” First, the very size of the industry worked against the possibility that any event of consequence could be “scooped” by a single newsreel; editors had more than enough crews to assign to anything newsworthy. Second, the growing influence of unionization (Local 644 in New York) encouraged the development of fraternal ties among cameramen, who were then less likely to see one another as competitors. “A cameraman who had the bad taste to scoop his rivals was sometimes discriminated against,” Fielding notes. And finally, the introduction of “rota pools” by 1935, whereby the number of cameramen assigned to any event was limited by agreement among the editors, who then pooled their coverage, “destroyed whatever vestiges of inter-company competition might have survived.”<sup>57</sup> One of the most famous newsreel gaffes occurred on May 6, 1937, when several different companies sent crews to Lakehurst, New Jersey, to cover the arrival of the German dirigible *Hindenberg*. When it became clear that the airship would be late, the cameraman sent by Universal, who had a heavy theater date back in the city, went home.<sup>58</sup> But because of pooling arrangements, Universal’s customers saw the same film of the catastrophe that everyone else did.

### New Films from Old

In 1937 British novelist (and amateur filmmaker) Alfred Gordon Bennett detected a sudden maturity in the nonfiction cinema. “It may, at first sight, seem somewhat curious to remark that news-reels can, when properly produced, prove to rank high in cinematic technique,” Bennett wrote in *Cinemanía*, his expansive study of the international film art. “Nowadays, one finds quite a lot of good cinema embodied in the editing of such items as football matches and lawn-tennis tournaments.”<sup>59</sup> Bennett valued the newsreel as a historical record. But he also felt that nonfiction subjects, for a variety of reasons, provided an exceptionally clear opportunity to observe pure cinematic technique. Transformation of the endless back-and-forth of a tennis match into five minutes of compelling cinema represented, for Bennett, true stylistic mastery—especially when the outcome had already been reported in the papers.

Few of Bennett’s peers in the critical community would have been willing to go quite so far, but Louis de Rochemont would have agreed. In the early 1930s de Rochemont was Movietone’s short subjects editor, with responsibility for “The Magic Carpet of Movietone” and “Adventures of a Newsreel Cameraman.” Those were amusing short subjects on a par with similar releases offered by Pathé and Paramount. Soon, however, de Rochemont would transform the entire nonfiction industry, energizing a form that was barely tolerated by most professional filmmakers.

He did this by applying the dramatic strategies of Hollywood narrative cinema to material that had previously been dismissed as “mere newsreels,” an approach first evident in two remarkable compilation features, *The Cry of the World* (1932) and *The First World War* (1934).<sup>60</sup>

Compilation documentaries, even feature-length compilation documentaries, were nothing new. A number had been produced in America during World War I, modeled after earlier German and British productions.<sup>61</sup> Because authentic European battle footage was strictly controlled, audiences waited eagerly for whatever material military censors would release. George Creel’s Committee on Public Information produced its own films as part of the government’s propaganda offensive, notably the features *Pershing’s Crusaders* and *America’s Answer*, both released in 1918. A few commercial producers, generally those already in the newsreel business, combined government footage with their own stock-shot libraries to make films like *Crashing Through to Berlin* (1918), assembled by Jack Cohn of the *Universal Weekly*.<sup>62</sup>

When the end of the war cut off the supply of free government footage, audience attention turned elsewhere. Nature and travel subjects dominated what remained of the market for nonfiction features. Throughout the 1930s, small New York sound studios were kept busy cutting, narrating, and scoring a host of popular adventure documentaries. RKO used Van Beuren’s facilities for Frank Buck’s *Bring ‘em Back Alive* (1932), *Wild Cargo* (1934), and *Fang and Claw* (1935).<sup>63</sup> It was less successful with a distaff version, *Adventure Girl* (1934), in which Joan Lowell, the female Indiana Jones, sought Inca treasure in Guatemala. Although released by Fox, Martin and Osa Johnson’s *Congorilla* (1932) was “synchronized” at the Atlas Sound Film studio in Long Island City.<sup>64</sup> Hazard Reeves’s Standard Sound Recording studio at 216 East 38th Street provided the same service for *Devil’s Playground* (1933), an account by sportsman George Vanderbilt of one of his fishing expeditions.

Not until *The Big Parade* (1925) and *What Price Glory?* (1926) demonstrated renewed box-office interest in the Great War did filmmakers return to the subject in a major way, igniting a cycle of World War I films that lasted into the early 1930s. Almost simultaneously, in 1926, the federal government suddenly allowed producers access to two million feet of wartime motion picture material, much of which had never before been released.<sup>65</sup> Once considered (except by antiquarians) as the filmic equivalent of yesterday’s newspaper, this old news footage now became a gold mine for nonfiction producers.

In addition to the libraries of news film producers like Pathé and Fox, several private stock film collections were also based in New York.<sup>66</sup> Abram Stone had opened his Film Library as early as 1908, offering “historical films, industrials, scenics, curiosities, [and] war films of every nation” under the slogan “maybe Stone has it.”<sup>67</sup> The General Film Library, operated by Sidney and Morris Kandel, followed in 1920. It held twenty million feet of negative, including the defunct *Kinograms*,

*Selznick*, and *Urban Kinet* newsreels. The Kandels also owned the Ideal studio in Hudson Heights, which they occasionally used when producing their own compilation films.<sup>68</sup> What made the prospect of using all this footage technologically feasible was the availability of Eastman Duplicating Film, first promoted in 1926 and substantially improved by 1929.<sup>69</sup> Earlier, any film not printed from original negative would suffer so much from problems with grain, contrast, and halation that secondary uses, including the incorporation of old scenes into new productions, were severely limited.

While these improvements in technology were developing in America, Esfir Schub completed two remarkable compilation features, *The Fall of the Romanov Dynasty* and *The Great Road* (both 1927). Jay Leyda, fully aware of the compilation documentary's already extensive history, felt that it was Schub who first "gave the newsreel a new dimension" and "brought newly to an artistic, dramatic life, footage that had hitherto been regarded as having, at the most, only the nature of historical fragments."<sup>70</sup> Schub achieved this effect by employing the same montage principles as Vertov and Eisenstein, editorial juxtapositions intended not merely to propel the narrative but to shape it for ideological ends. Even in the Soviet Union, however, the validity of the compilation film as an artistic work was not generally acknowledged. Although other films created for the anniversary of the Bolshevik Revolution, like Eisenstein's *October*, were fully credited to their directors, *The Fall of the Romanov Dynasty* was advertised only as a "Work by E. I. Schub."<sup>71</sup> The snub was more than simple sexism and reflected the general suspicion that mere compilation was a second-rate cinematic exercise—the same prejudice that Bennett would argue against a decade later. Now considered "the premier example of the compilation film," *The Fall of the Romanov Dynasty* was known in America largely by reputation at the time of its release.<sup>72</sup> *Cannons or Tractors?* (1930) Schub's pointed analysis of the conflict between communism and capitalism, had a much more direct effect on New York's documentary community. The Workers Film and Photo League circulated it to political groups in 1931–1932 and saw it as a model for similar work by its own members.<sup>73</sup>

Commercial producers, on the other hand, were probably inspired by a much more immediate phenomenon: the surprising popularity of Frederick Lewis Allen's 1931 best-seller, *Only Yesterday*. Allen's popular history of American life in the 1920s saw everything from the Peace Conference to the stock market crash as one interconnected series of culture shocks. Although similar accounts had long been a staple of general-interest magazines, *Only Yesterday* offered a wealth of detail and a well-timed explanation of America's current crisis.<sup>74</sup>

Within a few months of the book's appearance, Louis de Rochemont completed *The Cry of the World* for Fox. Where Allen's concern was purely domestic, de Rochemont's vision was global. Stylistically, the film's structure was clearly influenced by

the dialectical montage schemes of Soviet cinema. Disarmament speeches were juxtaposed with scenes of street fighting in Shanghai, undercutting the words of politicians and (unlike Schub's films) leaving the audience feeling disillusioned, cynical, and helpless. Far more bitter than Allen's book, *The Cry of the World* was a muck-raking critique of everything that had gone wrong in world affairs since the war: battlefield brutality, labor strife, ethnic rioting, fascism, gangsterism, and the economic depression. The women's suffrage campaign appears to have been the only positive moment in a "staggering compendium of surging upheavals whose blind fury totters nations and sweeps down super-men."<sup>75</sup> Nontheatrical rights (and copyright) were assigned by Fox to the "non-partisan" International Film Foundation, which Fox itself had created as a vehicle for its educational operations.

The other major newsreel operations followed suit. Frederic Ullman and Gilbert Seldes made *This Is America* (1933) for Pathé, hailed by Jay Leyda as "the earliest forceful compilation made in America" and clearly influenced by *Cannons or Tractors?*<sup>76</sup> Universal's news operation produced *World in Revolt* (1934), and Paramount offered *World in Flames* (1940).<sup>77</sup> Each drew on the parent company's proprietary news archives and surveyed the years since the war with a critical eye. De Rochemont's second compilation feature, *The First World War* (1934), dealt only with the conflict itself, although the implicit suggestion of more such wars to follow made it painfully relevant to contemporary audiences.

A tremendous political gulf separated the compilation tracts produced by commercial operators and those made (or wished for) by the far left. The radical journal *Filmfront* placed both *World in Flames* and *The First World War* on its list of "The Worst Anti-Labor Photoplays of 1934," along with Paramount's *Come On, Marines* and the Nazi propaganda film *S. A. Mann Brand*.<sup>78</sup> Writing thirty years later, however, Jay Leyda admitted that "nothing comparable to [*The First World War*] in its subject or using this material has been made since."<sup>79</sup> Fox reissued the film in 1939, only a few weeks after the start of the *second* world war.<sup>80</sup>

Usually unable to tap into the newsreel archives of the major studios, independent producers made good use of material available in Washington, at London's Imperial War Museum, and from local stock-shot libraries. Their films were less synoptic than those produced by Universal or Fox and focused instead on more specific subjects, such as the Bonus Army, "merchants of death," and similar depression-era concerns. Politically left filmmakers did not have the resources to produce and distribute such features, but exploitation producers were more than willing to accommodate any radical perspectives avoided by the majors. For example, where the Universal newsreel covered an event like the Bonus March under the headline "Red Hordes Meet in National Capital," William Pizor, better known today for films like *Blonde Captive* and *Virgins of Bali*, sympathetically addressed the problems of veterans in *Heroes All* (1931).<sup>81</sup> Pizor contextualized his news footage with an on-screen discussion between the editor of the *New York Daily Mirror* and retired Army Gen-



eral John J. Bradley, both of whom put an antiwar spin on the material. Likewise, Sam Cummins, more typically involved with films like *Girls for Sale!* and *Love Life of a Gorilla*, made several such compilations, often in collaboration with Bud Pollard, including *Forgotten Men* (1933), *War Is a Racket* (1934), and *Why This War?* (1939). On his own, Pollard made *The Dead March* (1937), in which unknown soldiers rise from their graves to explain the ideals they died for. Although an independent release, *The Dead March* appears to have been produced at the Fox studios and incorporated Fox news footage.

The most interesting of these films would seem to have been those that crossed the boundaries between the news film genre and the ethnic and race film market. *The Unknown Soldier Speaks* (1934) was directed by Jack Goldberg (producer of *Harlem Is Heaven*) and written by the young Robert Rossen (later a Communist Party member and director of such politically concerned films as *All the King's Men*). Prints were prepared in "white" and "black" versions, the latter incorporating scenes of the all-black 369th Infantry.<sup>82</sup> In addition to his more conventional compilation films, Sam Cummins also produced *Hitler's Reign of Terror* (1934), the first anti-Nazi feature made in America. Working with Joseph Seiden, Cummins blended footage smuggled out of Germany by Cornelius Vanderbilt Jr. with staged reenactments and interviews with people like Helen Keller (whose books the Nazis had burned), Rabbi Stephen Wise, and Fannie Hurst. There were even two Zionist compilation features, *My People's Dream*, released by the Palestine-American Film Company in 1934, and *The Holy Oath* (1937), which combined news footage with a dramatic frame story produced at the new Reeves Sound studio at 1600 Broadway.

### Time Marches On

Although most of the compilation features produced during the 1930s drew a straight line from World War I through the depression to the rise of Nazism, some had a more biographical focus. Universal released *The Fighting President*, an unashamed tribute to FDR, only one month after the inauguration, padding the few minutes of available Roosevelt coverage with the usual survey of historic news footage. More problematic was *Mussolini Speaks*, a homage to the Italian dictator released that same year by Columbia. Columbia's president, Harry Cohn, traveled to Rome after its release, where he was presented with a special decoration by Il Duce himself.<sup>83</sup> Such titles would have been considered by many in the business as "magazinish," meaning that their narrow focus and didactic overtones suggested something from the old magazine reels. Those one-reel miscellanies had long been overshadowed by the more topical and episodic newsreels. But Louis de Rochemont, now working with Henry Luce and the *Time* news organization, was about to change that.

De Rochemont stopped working for Fox in 1934, but for his new job he didn't



even have to leave the building. Luce had established offices for *The March of Time* at the same address, 460 West 54th Street, and negotiated direct access to Fox's newsreel archives.<sup>84</sup> De Rochemont's boss would be Roy E. Larsen, whose *March of Time* radio show had aired on CBS since 1931. It was Larsen who first conceived the idea of "dramatizing" the news, with actors reading the parts of Huey Long, Adolf Hitler, or Franklin Roosevelt from scripts prepared by the writing staff. Although the Roosevelt impersonations were dropped in 1938 after the president complained about the words being put in his mouth, most of the audience regarded the programs as acceptable variations on radio drama. Indeed, the acting company included such local favorites as Everett Sloane, Agnes Moorehead, Paul Stewart, and Orson Welles.<sup>85</sup> Borrowing whatever he could from the radio show (including its jaunty Harold Arlen theme song, originally written for *The Earl Carroll Vanities*), de Rochemont set out to translate *Time's* "new pictorial journalism" to the motion picture screen.

Like the news magazine, *The March of Time* would be more analytical than topical, devoting more attention to single stories and appearing less frequently than its competition (once a month instead of the twice-weekly schedule of the newsreels). *The March of Time* was also far more sober than the average newsreel, shunning animal tricks and baby parades, and employing Westbrook Van Voorhis, the radio show's "voice of fate," as narrator. And rather than letting the day's events set their agenda, as competing newsreels did, the editors of *The March of Time* first decided what to cover (and what to say about it), then went out to collect the footage. As editor Morrie Roizman told Raymond Fielding, "If the script didn't fit the pictures, we'd make the pictures fit the script, and we'd work until we had a happy marriage."<sup>86</sup>

In practice, this approach meant that material might be lifted out of context, altered, or simply made up. When suitable footage of Nazi beer halls was unavailable, a *brauhaus* in Hoboken served just as well; "concentration camp graveyards" were constructed on Staten Island; the newsreel's own offices doubled as Nazi Party headquarters. Directors, in particular the clever Jack Glenn, were often able to persuade celebrities like Fiorello La Guardia, Father Divine, and German-American Bund leader Fritz Kuhn to play themselves in its staged "re-creations." Ordinary citizens did the same. "In order to recreate a significant scene in *March of Time's* TVA episode," boasted one publicity brochure, "cameramen make actors of this Tennessee Valley couple." The accompanying still shows a camera crew and director staging the performance at the edge of a field in eastern Tennessee.<sup>87</sup>

If the original participants were unavailable (or uncooperative), doubles could be employed, although such substitution was more difficult, and more controversial, than it had been on radio. Radio listeners were accustomed to hearing the news presented in the third person by an announcer of some sort. Audiences for theatri-

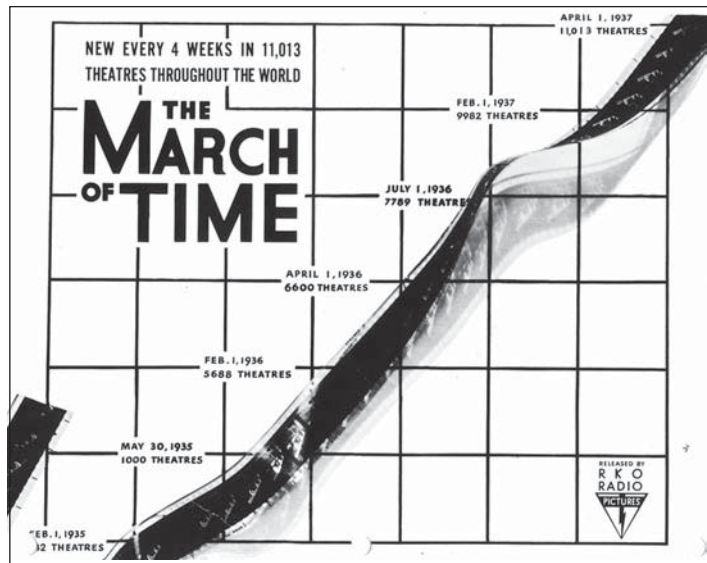
cal newsreels, on the other hand, had come to value the authenticity of first-person coverage, often brought back at great cost by intrepid news cameramen. Larsen and de Rochemont understood the problem but still felt justified in “re-creating” an event to heighten its dramatic impact. To improve their coverage of the invasion of Ethiopia, long shots of Haile Selassie were freely intercut with scenes of a helpful office boy made up and costumed to resemble the emperor. Lacking footage of Governor Huey Long’s notorious altercation in a public rest room, *The March of Time* simply restaged it. Luce called this strategy “fakery in allegiance to the truth,” although he never said whose truth these scenes were meant to represent.<sup>88</sup> Even more obviously than in a Hearst newsreel, there was no pretense of evenhandedness. *The March of Time* clearly played favorites and regularly denounced figures like Huey Long, Francis Townsend, and Father Coughlin as part of the nation’s “lunatic fringe.”

Fielding describes the political slant of *The March of Time* as “predominantly liberal,” which, given the content of rival newsreels, seems a fair characterization.<sup>89</sup> Writing in 1936, Paul Rotha also felt that its “purposeful shaping of news-reel material” was (at least stylistically) in line with the political tradition of Vertov’s *Kino-Pravda* newsreels of the 1920s.<sup>90</sup> But Jay Leyda, who was working in Moscow with Eisenstein when the reel first appeared, found *The March of Time* just as “reactionary” as the competition, and perhaps even more dangerous for its skillful manipulation of montage techniques. “The last film weapon perfected in America before the swiftly approaching war,” he called it later.<sup>91</sup>

Today, the free-wheeling manipulation of fact and fiction in *The March of Time* seems, at best, irresponsible. Yet, neither the radio show nor the newsreel appears to have troubled very many people at the time. Released internationally by RKO, *The March of Time* was playing regularly in more than eleven thousand theaters within two years of its first appearance. The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences awarded it a special Oscar in 1936 for having “revolutionized” the newsreel, a genre it had previously ignored. What de Rochemont had done was to find a way of breaking down the boundaries dividing newsreel, Hollywood fiction, and the educational picture. *The March of Time* was didactic and informative, but what surprised both critics and audiences was the fact that it was also very entertaining. Except for the news junkies who patronized theaters like the Trans-Lux, most audiences regarded nonfiction films the way they would a dose of castor oil: they watched because they knew it was good for them. By treating informational subjects with the narrative strategies of Hollywood melodrama, *The March of Time* not only changed the status of documentary film, but even suggested that documentary values might be grafted onto conventional Hollywood entertainments with similar success.

This discovery was directly responsible for the spellbinding approach developed in Frank Capra’s World War II Signal Corps films, television productions like

Promotional graphic showing the surge in popularity of RKO's *March of Time* news magazine, the screen version of Henry Luce's "new pictorial journalism."



*Victory at Sea*, and theatrical documentaries from *Hearts and Minds* to *Fahrenheit 9/11*. "To us, the word 'documentary' was a dirty word," Louis de Rochemont remembered.<sup>92</sup> He did whatever was necessary to present factual material in a compelling fashion—and that did not mean simply allowing the material to speak for itself, textbook style. Capra would also distance himself from the conventional notion of documentary, a genre he characterized as "ash-can films made by kooks with long hair" or "films about polar bears sliding on their asses down mountainsides."<sup>93</sup> His own documentaries, beginning with *Prelude to War*, an Oscar winner in 1942, clearly built on the innovations pioneered by Louis de Rochemont.<sup>94</sup>

Over an eighteen-month period in 1939 and 1940, de Rochemont himself directed *The March of Time*'s first feature-length release, *The Ramparts We Watch*. An extended version of one of the newsreel's two-reel productions, the film looked at life in an average American town during World War I and suggested parallels with events of the present day. Although adamantly denying to the *New York Times* that the film was a documentary, the producers also made clear that, contrary to the "elaborate technical rituals of Hollywood productions," they were using a cast of nonprofessionals, shooting on location (in New London, Connecticut), and avoiding "trick shots through the strings of a harp." The film also made use of Westbrook van Voorhis's narration and considerable amounts of interpolated newsreel footage, "blended so perfectly with the film photographed by the *Time* crew, they say, that it is practically impossible to detect the inserts."<sup>95</sup> This material included not only the expected scenes of Woodrow Wilson, Theodore Roosevelt, and General John J. Pershing but also footage lifted directly from *Baptism of Fire*, a Nazi propa-

ganda film dealing with the invasion of Poland. That film's American distributor, the German UFA organization, accused RKO of film piracy and threatened legal action.<sup>96</sup>

De Rochemont's subsequent theatrical features, notably *The House on 92nd Street* (1945), *Lost Boundaries* (1949), *The Whistle at Eaton Falls* (1951), and *Walk East on Beacon* (1952), continued to use voice-over narration, location filming, and "newsreel" photography as a way of enhancing dramatic authenticity. Indeed, this approach became so popular that it was soon the default style for all "realistic" American movies. Decades later its influence could still be seen in dramatic features and even television dramas produced out of New York.<sup>97</sup>

### Film as Politics

Schub, and later de Rochemont, had shown how nonfiction material could be organized dramatically for political purposes—in effect, putting those "good cinema" techniques applauded by Alfred Gordon Bennett to directly propagandistic purposes. During the 1920s and 1930s, however, the only avowedly political filmmakers in the United States were leftists based in New York and loosely associated with the Workers International Relief, which had been created by the Communist International in 1921 for, among other things, "the production of proletarian movie pictures."<sup>98</sup> Despite the occasional "socially conscious" film from the big studios, this group felt that its concerns were not being addressed by American filmmakers. "Who, then, is going to make our films?" Robert Gessner asked in 1935. "The answer is obvious—if we can no longer expect Hollywood to make films of reality, films of labor, then we must make them for ourselves."<sup>99</sup>

In 1926 filmmakers associated with the Workers International Relief had produced *The Passaic Textile Strike*, a feature-length account of one of the decade's most significant labor conflicts. While the local newsreels covered the event in their own fashion, the Communist-dominated Relief Committee began filming the strike from the inside, intending to screen the footage at fund-raisers as the strike wore on. The committee first hired a professional crew from Boston to make the film, but fired them after rejecting their plan of "putting pretty girl strikers into the foreground of the film with lots of romance for the American movie public."<sup>100</sup> Instead, the film was made by political activists. As footage began to pile up, what had started as a newsreel was gradually shaped into a seven-reel feature (with "re-created" sequences inserted as needed). *The Passaic Textile Strike* toured the country for months, even after the walkout was settled, fascinating working-class audiences who had never before seen themselves portrayed so sympathetically on screen. *The Daily Worker* even compared it favorably to *The Battleship Potemkin*.<sup>101</sup>

As the economic depression deepened and the stature of the Communist Party grew, the Workers Film and Photo League was created in 1930 to educate filmmakers and audiences regarding the power of film as both “a weapon of reaction” and “an instrument for social purposes—in the U.S.S.R.” Activities included publications, lectures, screenings, classroom instruction, and, ultimately, support of the “left movie-maker who is documenting dramatically and persuasively the disproportions in our present society.”<sup>102</sup> The League and its programs operated on a shoestring, supported by meager dues, film rentals, and the occasional sale of news photographs to radical and liberal journals. As one member recalled, meetings were held in “a dingy first floor loft with a huge banner strung across the walls [reading] THE CAMERA IS A WEAPON IN THE CLASS STRUGGLE and all sorts of voluble, articulate and verbose types hurling verbal shafts at each other across the room either in banter or deadly earnest.”<sup>103</sup> Many of the League’s members—including Harry Alan Potamkin, Lewis Jacobs, Leo Hurwitz, Thomas Brandon, Ralph Steiner, Leo Seltzer, and Irving Lerner—would play significant roles in New York’s independent film community for decades to come, as critics, distributors, teachers, and, most notably, documentary film producers.<sup>104</sup>

Although not an official arm of the Communist Party, the League’s relationship with the Workers International Relief allowed it direct access to the latest Soviet films. Screenings of Eisenstein’s *Old and New*, Alexander Dovzhenko’s *Arsenal*, and Ilya Trauberg’s *China Express* were used as both fund-raisers and aesthetic models. The connection also allowed films produced by League members to share the bill with Soviet masterworks booked into the Cameo, the “home of the Russian art cinema” at 138 West 42nd Street. The League also screened films at the Acme Theatre at 56 East 14th Street and at its various “offices” (often simply the crowded apartments of members like Paul Strand) in the Union Square area, including 220 East 14th Street, 12 East 17th Street, and 31 East 21st Street. Throughout 1933 and 1934 the League also held twice-monthly screenings at the New School for Social Research, “reviving all the fine old distinguished films that it can possibly obtain,” including *The Student of Prague*, *Beggar on Horseback*, *The Last Moment*, *Stark Love*, and *Animal Crackers*.<sup>105</sup>

Because money and equipment were always in short supply, many of the League’s films were simple newsreels. “We never had any moviolas,” Leo Seltzer told Russell Campbell. “We did our editing by feel, by intuition, and then we’d run it off and see if it looked right. We had no viewers, just rewinds and an old Griswold splicer.”<sup>106</sup> Despite such handicaps, League members would run the work of Eisenstein and Pudovkin back and forth on the editing bench, looking for the secret that would energize their own films on the Bonus March or the Scottsboro case (Pudovkin’s *Film Technique*, available in English translation since 1929, was both textbook and bible). In 1934 the League released its first feature, *Ernst Thaelmann: Fighter against*

*Fascism*, which members cobbled together from smuggled German footage and their own coverage of local demonstrations protesting the arrest of the German Communist leader. Earl Browder provided the narration. The same technique was later used on *The Birth of a New China* (1936). But just as the League seemed to be expanding into longer and more ambitious work, with branches opening across the country (including Perth Amboy and Paterson, New Jersey; New Haven, Connecticut; and San Francisco), it came apart over basic issues of politics and art.

Inevitably, films produced by the League began to come under more serious scrutiny from Party leaders. Some of the members, notably Lerner, Hurwitz, and Steiner, began to chafe under what they saw as increasingly restrictive political directives. They also felt that a lack of “basic craftsmanship” in many of the League’s films was undermining their political effectiveness. The developing split could be seen in the reception of two ambitious films produced by Nancy Naumburg and James Guy. *Sheriffed* (1934) was an investigation of economic problems affecting the small farmer, filmed in Doylestown, Pennsylvania, with 16mm equipment. Writing in *New Masses* (under a pseudonym), Lerner hailed *Sheriffed* as “the first [film] to come out of the revolutionary movement.” But he also insisted that its “vitality, freshness and honesty” were diminished by “almost every conceivable error of cinematography.” The lesson for Lerner was that “revolutionary films must have high artistic quality in addition to their message if they are to have the most popular appeal.”<sup>107</sup>

Under League auspices, Naumburg and Guy then produced an account of the 1934 New York taxi strike, which the League premiered at the New School. *Taxi* made use of news footage of the strike itself, but also dramatized events by employing members of the Taxicab Drivers Union and the Theatre Union Studio.<sup>108</sup> “We used actual hackies, no actors, and friends as passengers,” Naumburg wrote in 1975. “We attended strike meetings and even a wedding of one of the cab drivers. We did not even have a carefully written screenplay. We just blocked out the action of what we wanted and shot it.”<sup>109</sup>

Naumburg, the League’s only woman director, is generally ignored in histories of the period.<sup>110</sup> A 1932 Vassar graduate, she had been a student of Hallie Flanagan and an active member of her Vassar Experimental Theater group (Flanagan would later head the Federal Theatre Project). Historian William Alexander describes Naumburg as “a League member who tended to work independently.”<sup>111</sup> Her co-director, James Guy, was said to be a member of the John Reed Club. In 1937 Naumburg edited *We Make the Movies*, an anthology highlighting the various technical crafts drawn upon in filmmaking. Although focused on Hollywood production, the book argues against the “standardization” of such films and the lack of films dealing with “the lives of the vast majority of Americans, living on small farms, working in the mines and the factories.” Such “true films of American life” will be made,



she claimed, only by production units that reject traditional avenues of finance, production, and distribution. These independent producers will have to operate on very low budgets and target the more sophisticated “large city audiences,” at least in the beginning.<sup>112</sup> This combination of innovative production techniques and highly targeted niche marketing would define independent filmmaking in New York for generations.

Robert Gessner, reviewing the work of the League in *New Theatre*, felt that, in technical terms, *Taxi* was disappointing. “The photography is erratic and amateurish; the direction is almost entirely absent, and the editing is weak, the titles misplaced and poorly worded. The scenario, if any, is so much in the background that you feel the cameraman is doing the writing while shooting.” Nonetheless, Gessner insisted, “these faults are not the important features of this film,” which was still valuable because “the raw meat of social reality is preferable to the diet of creampuffs of Hollywood.”<sup>113</sup>

It is not surprising that Gessner, or any other critic in the 1930s, would have found *Sheriffed* and *Taxi* formless and undisciplined. Instead of taking as their model the powerful and didactic cinema of Vertov and Schub, Naumburg and Guy had apparently created a far more open text, perhaps anticipating the improvisational style of the British Free Cinema movement and other radical documentary strategies of a much later era (both films are currently lost). Indeed, “you feel the cameraman is doing the writing while shooting” would have been considered high praise during the *camera stylo* era a generation later.

### Nykino: New Cinema from New York

The “raw meat of social reality” was not enough for Hurwitz, Lerner, Steiner, and the others who split off from the League by the end of 1934 and formed Nykino. By avoiding the oversight of Party functionaries, they hoped to blend the social and political concerns of New York’s “left movie-makers” with an appropriately sophisticated level of craftsmanship. They also wanted to work more with dramatization, which they had been investigating with the Workers Laboratory Theatre, but which Party leaders considered of lesser value than pure news film. For the first Nykino release, *Pie in the Sky* (1934–1935), Steiner and Lerner collaborated with Group Theatre members Elia Kazan, Ellman Koolish, and Molly Day Thatcher on an antireligious vaudeville skit shot in a Queens junkyard.<sup>114</sup>

In a 1935 essay in *New Theatre*, Steiner and Hurwitz credited Lee Strasberg with showing them how “even in a documentary film it is necessary to use theatrical means of affecting an audience—suspense, build, dramatic line, etc.”<sup>115</sup> These theatrical strategies, although arrived at by a different route, were not so far removed

from those employed by de Rochemont and his staff on *The March of Time*. But although the Nykino group admired de Rochemont's seriousness of purpose and validation of dramatization as a documentary tool, they found his work as reactionary as every other commercial newsreel. In 1936 they began production of an "answer" to *The March of Time*, a populist series called "The World Today." The first subject, *Sunnyside: The Second Battle of Long Island*, was photographed by Willard Van Dyke at a Queens housing development whose homeowners were fighting foreclosure. The residents played themselves in their battle against bankers and sheriffs, essentially an updated variant of *The Passaic Textile Strike*. The second film, *Black Legion*, dealt with the murder of a WPA employee in Michigan by hooded terrorists. Although he made it entirely with professional actors, Lerner wanted *Black Legion* to look and feel "like a documentary film."<sup>116</sup> Closely resembling a politicized *March of Time* episode, *Black Legion* blurs the line between fiction and nonfiction in order to dramatize the essence of its subject matter—a style that would become increasingly controversial within the developing documentary movement.

Underfunded, politically conflicted, and insecure in their developing notion of just what documentary film was supposed to be, the League and its rivals were suddenly energized by the arrival in 1936 of the great European documentary filmmaker Joris Ivens. Born in Holland, Ivens had made films all over the world and was already renowned for such classics of social realism as *New Earth* (1933) and *Borinage* (1934). He came to New York on a mission from Mezhrabpom, the Soviet production company for which he had produced a new version of *Borinage* while working in Moscow. He was received as a giant by New York's left-wing film community. Mezhrabpom hoped that Ivens could proselytize on behalf of independent film production, study American filmmaking technique, and perhaps make a film here.<sup>117</sup> He screened his films at the New School, New York University, and other venues in and around the city.

In the eyes of the Nykino group, Ivens and his films validated their more humanistic approach to documentary production. William Alexander suggests that the impact of Ivens's lectures, and the concurrent release in New York of Dovzhenko's *Frontier*, encouraged the group to raise its sights once again. In 1937 the membership expanded and reorganized as Frontier Films. The group now included Paul Strand, Elia Kazan, and Ben Maddow, as well as the "cultural commissar" of the American Communist Party, John Howard Lawson.<sup>118</sup>

In fact, Ivens had only an indirect effect on the New York filmmakers (largely through his relationship with film editor Helen van Dongen, who remained in New York for the rest of her career). He was in Los Angeles when a Hollywood antifascist group sent him back to Europe to film *The Spanish Earth*, which he and van Dongen assembled in New York at the Edison studio (then called Film Art Studios) between May and July 1937.<sup>119</sup> With a narration written by Ernest Hemingway and recorded

by Orson Welles, the film was successfully shown at the White House and a series of invitational screenings on the West Coast. At that point, apparently at the insistence of some of the film's backers, notably Lillian Hellman and Dorothy Parker, the Welles narration was removed. When *The Spanish Earth* opened in Manhattan in August, it was Hemingway's voice on the sound track.<sup>120</sup> According to Ivens's biographer, Hans Schoots, Hemingway hated the Welles narration from the beginning and was already fuming during the recording session. As Welles remembered it, Hemingway exploded when Welles questioned some of the lines he was supposed to read. "You . . . effeminate boys of the theatre, what do you know about real war?" Hemingway growled, referring to Welles as "a faggot" and threatening him with a chair. But others in the room at the time reported only "several critical but friendly comments about Hemingway's text."<sup>121</sup> A more simple explanation is that the Hollywood crowd may have been worried that audiences would confuse the narrator with Lamont Cranston, the character Welles was playing each week on the radio series *The Shadow*.

Ivens followed with *The 400,000,000* (1939), which dealt in similar fashion with the war in China. Again, he and van Dongen completed postproduction in New York, with Fredric March recording the narration at the Reeves Sound Studio (Morris Carnovsky, Sidney Lumet, and other New York actors can also be heard on the track).<sup>122</sup> Even though Ivens maintained his distance from Nykino and Frontier, the impact of his style was immediately apparent, especially in two of Frontier's 1937 films, *Heart of Spain* and *China Strikes Back*. Herbert Kline, the editor of *New Theatre*, had gone to Spain to aid the Loyalist cause and was commissioned to produce a fund-raising film by Dr. Norman Bethune, the pioneer of blood transfusion. He returned to New York with a mountain of unassembled footage, which Hurwitz and Strand agreed to turn into a film. Ben Maddow worked with Kline on the narration. Brilliantly edited, climaxing in a classic montage sequence that metaphorically links the giving of blood to the entire war against fascism, *Heart of Spain* has been characterized by historian William Alexander as "perhaps the finest Frontier film" and "a tribute to and an outcome of [Ivens's] *New Earth*."<sup>123</sup> The Frontier group did essentially the same thing with another collection of footage, this time a record of Mao Tse-tung's Long March smuggled out of China by Harry Dunham. *China Strikes Back* played in 204 theaters in the New York area alone.<sup>124</sup>

What Ivens really taught the filmmakers in New York was the crucial distinction between a plea on behalf of individual people and a tract celebrating the abstract notion of "the people." Ivens was not, of course, merely suggesting the adoption of a cozier, more humanist philosophy, but a new strategy intended to transmit the political message beyond union halls and tenement neighborhoods. "We have appealed so far to the 'subway circuit' of motion picture houses," Frontier announced in 1937, "for the most part independently owned and exhibiting the finer foreign films throughout the country. We propose now to open up new channels which will

embrace the greatest potential theatrical and extra-theatrical audience for living and purposeful films that exists in America.”<sup>125</sup>

Frontier Films released its first entirely original production, *People of the Cumberlandlands*, in 1938. A brief study of the need for political education in the mountains of southern Tennessee, the film was a collaborative effort involving Sidney Meyers, Jay Leyda, Elia Kazan, Ralph Steiner, Helen van Dongen, Erskine Caldwell, Alex North, and many others. In *People of the Cumberlandlands* the specific problems of real people call for political solutions, a distinct shift of emphasis from something like *Sunnyside: The Second Battle of Long Island*, in which the political solution was itself the point of the film.

Frontier’s greatest work, *Native Land* (begun in 1936 as *Labor Spy*, but not completed until 1942), would be the culmination of this developing style, blending news footage, a dramatic narrative enacted by professional actors (notably Howard da Silva), Marc Blitzstein’s music, and an evocative commentary by Ben Maddow, read by Paul Robeson.<sup>126</sup> Although financial problems might explain some of the lengthy delay in production, William Alexander suggests that a major reason was the “perfectionism” of directors Hurwitz and Strand, who intended to make this film an answer to the haphazard agit-prop essays of the early 1930s. In any case, the delay would prove fatal to both *Native Land* and the Frontier Films organization.

By the time the film opened in May 1942 the documentary movement was stronger than ever, but it had been entirely reoriented in support of the war effort. There was little interest in an attack on union-busting and the murder of sharecroppers in the South, concerns that suddenly seemed out of date and, even to many on the left, politically embarrassing. Never given a proper initial release, the film was pulled from distribution and remained unseen for decades.<sup>127</sup> But even before it was completed, internal struggles exacerbated by its production had split Frontier Films down the middle. Irritated by what they saw as Hurwitz and Strand’s domination of the collective, and less enthralled by dramatization as a documentary style, Van Dyke and Steiner abandoned Frontier and went off on their own. In fact, Van Dyke and Steiner were never as politically radical as the rest of the Frontier staff and were increasingly uncomfortable in a popular front organization linked to Party stalwarts like Lawson, who, as Steiner put it, “wanted to say everything’s terrible with America.”<sup>128</sup>

Another way to understand this split is to look at how the various members related to outside projects like Pare Lorentz’s federally funded “information films.”<sup>129</sup> A film and music critic whose writing had caught the attention of the Roosevelt administration, Lorentz was commissioned by the Resettlement Administration in 1935 to produce a film outlining the New Deal case for Dust Bowl relief. Lorentz hired Strand, Hurwitz, and Steiner to shoot the film, but they were unhappy with the script he had prepared, which to them seemed overly impressionistic. In truth, Lorentz had never made a film before, but the real differences were clearly political.

Lorentz was a New Deal Democrat operating under skeptical congressional oversight, and any film he produced would have been far too mild for the Nykino group. As historian Erik Barnouw put it, "The dissidents saw the dust storms not just as a catastrophe of nature, but as a consequence of the misuse of land by a rapacious social system. Perhaps—to an extent—Lorentz did too."<sup>130</sup>

Lorentz completed all the postproduction work for *The Plough That Broke the Plains* at ESSI in late 1935, including the recording of Virgil Thomson's landmark musical score.<sup>131</sup> Predictably, Irving Lerner argued that Lorentz had "vitiating the integrity of the original concept" when he rejected the ideas of the Nykino group. "Nevertheless," he allowed, "with all its faults of bad scenario, unimaginative cutting, and unclear viewpoint, Mr. Lorentz's [*sic*] film still commands attention because in the various stages of its development he managed to secure the services of talented artists."<sup>132</sup> For Lerner, the film was just as "rhetorical and literary" as Robert Flaherty's *Man of Aran*. When Lorentz began work on *The River* in January 1937, he had a similarly talented but very different crew: Willard Van Dyke, Floyd Crosby (who had photographed Murnau's *Tabu*), and Stacy Woodard, an Oscar-winning maker of novelty and industrial films. But he still returned to Astoria to work on postproduction.

If the arrival in New York of Joris Ivens had clearly been an event of major importance to all these filmmakers, he was not the only European visitor to offer a model for the future development of nonfiction cinema. The British critic, historian, and documentary film producer Paul Rotha arrived in New York in September 1937 at the invitation of the Rockefeller Foundation and the Museum of Modern Art. He taught an elite class at the museum, lectured widely, and screened a package of British documentaries (including such classics as *Night Mail*, *Housing Problems*, and *Song of Ceylon*). He had recently published *Documentary Film*, then the only book of consequence on the subject. A critical and historical survey of the international documentary movement, it divided nonfiction film into four distinct "traditions." Robert Flaherty and his films represented the "romantic tradition"; Joris Ivens, Alberto Cavalcanti, and Henri Storck were the "continental realists"; the "news reel tradition" was that of Vertov, with a few kind words for the newly unveiled *March of Time*; and the "propaganda tradition" was illustrated by films from Russia, Great Britain, Italy, and Germany.<sup>133</sup> Rotha had little to say about fascist documentaries, few of which he had been able to see. *Triumph of the Will* he knew only by reputation. His Russian examples were all dramatic re-creations, like *Potemkin*, *Turksib*, and *Salt for Svanetia*. In his view, the British documentaries, and especially the work of John Grierson at the Empire Marketing Board and General Post Office, were the most valuable contributions to the field. "In five years," he said of the Grierson unit, "it has brought considerable repute to this country as a film-producing centre, repute of a kind that lives longer and goes further than a flag-wagging story film."<sup>134</sup>

America had almost no place in Rotha's documentary tradition, and he made

his opinions clear at every opportunity. He constructed an elaborate defense for the sponsored nature of Grierson's films, and his slap at "flag-wagging story films" was specifically directed at Soviet propaganda features like *Old and New* and those who admired them. He even went so far as to claim that the success of *Turksib* in London should be credited to John Grierson's editing of the British version. Rotha opened his book with an epigram from Vladimir Mayakovsky—"Art cannot be non-political"—but he was extremely comfortable in promoting an approach to documentary in which the ruling elites in business and government controlled the purse strings.

Such opinions were a very hard sell to an audience of New York documentary filmmakers in 1937. Pare Lorentz hated Rotha's condescension, Paul Strand rejected the wishy-washy politics of the films he admired, and everyone was jealous of the well-financed British documentary machine he had come to promote.<sup>135</sup> Van Dyke and Steiner, on the other hand, saw Rotha's vision as a way out of the political dead-end in which they found themselves. In April 1938 they formed American Documentary Films, Inc. and took up a commission from the American Institute of Planners to produce a documentary on city planning for the 1939 World's Fair, *The City*.<sup>136</sup>

For all the passion and sweat equity expended by members of Nykino or the Film and Photo League, the results on-screen always tended to look a bit cheap when compared with the competition. *The March of Time* could be dismissed as "slick," but even Grierson and the Russians had real budgets, modern technical equipment, and salaries. *Taxi*, produced for \$250 cash by Naumburg and Guy, was praised for its good intentions, but was still considered technically embarrassing.<sup>137</sup> Effective films needed both craftsmanship and financing. Hurwitz and Strand rejected Grierson's brand of sponsorship, but then had to spend large amounts of time raising money from helpful supporters. Elia Kazan recalled attending board meetings of Frontier Films "in the office of a wealthy tax lawyer," surrounded by wood paneling and valuable art. "In this luxurious office, high above the troubled streets of Manhattan, they would plan films dramatizing the problems of the impoverished masses."<sup>138</sup> Steiner and Van Dyke realized that sponsorship by well-meaning liberals was still sponsorship and that they could produce "films in the public interest" with as clear a conscience (and fewer technical limitations) working in the for-profit sector.<sup>139</sup>

### The Industrial Film Industry

The least glamorous segment of the motion picture industry, the sponsored or industrial film, flourished in New York in the 1920s and 1930s, providing employment for hundreds of actors, writers, and technicians. Indeed, a day job in the industry often allowed a man with a camera, like Irving Browning, the time and opportunity



for some creative work of his own. Even Paul Strand made a good living as a newsreel stringer and freelance industrial filmmaker. His own camera, an Akeley designed specifically for filming horse races, expeditions, and other “documentary” subjects, was itself the subject of one of his most famous photographic studies in 1923. In 1928 Strand made his own film on the lack of open spaces in the American city, *Where the Pavement Begins*, for Visugraphic, one of many local industrial film producers.<sup>140</sup>

A new and dynamic form of promotion, such films were frequently sponsored by the new products and industries proliferating in the postwar economy. Visugraphic, for example, found many of its clients in the growing airline industry and produced in rapid succession *Anywhere by Air* (Curtiss-Wright, 1930), *Coast to Coast in 48 Hours* (TAT Airlines, 1930), and *Wings of Tomorrow* (1931, a promotional film for the Autogiro).<sup>141</sup> In May 1931 Visugraphic claimed that 24,813,860 people had attended 41,126 showings of its “advertising films” over the past ten months.<sup>142</sup>

To a large degree, the expansion of the sponsored and educational film markets was also driven by the successful introduction of 16mm as their new exhibition standard. The sixth edition of *The Blue Book of the Non-Theatrical Screen* (1929) was the first to include a special section on 16mm film. It listed 485 films available only in 16mm, with another 300 available in both 16 and 35mm. The following year the numbers had risen to 605 and 700, and by 1931 to 750 and 850, respectively.<sup>143</sup> In Cleveland’s public schools, for example, the number of 35mm showings increased modestly from 2,527 during the 1929–1930 school year to 2,780 three years later. Over the same period, 16mm showings rose from 4,392 to 32,835.<sup>144</sup> Within two years the number of 16mm films in the market doubled, and the nontheatrical industry was primed for its own transition to sound.

Most educational and sponsored films were made in the East. By the beginning of 1931 Paramount and Warner Bros. were each making one “sponsored film” a week, Kinograms had leased the Ideal studio for a series of industrials, Audio-Cinema and Visugraphic were both very active, and Universal and Fox were considering industrial film operations of their own.<sup>145</sup> Sound-on-disc projectors appeared on the 16mm market in 1930, sound-on-film by 1932. In 1935 RCA was selling a single-system 16mm sound camera that allowed amateurs to produce their own talkies.<sup>146</sup> But the real money would be in producing and distributing commercial films that could be exhibited in this growing market, and such films required professional technicians and studio facilities.

When 35mm was still the nontheatrical standard, much of this demand had been filled by producers like J. R. Bray, who serviced theatrical and nontheatrical customers alike. The Fleischers, who began with Bray and modeled much of their operation on his, also ran a separate educational division, which made *The Einstein Theory of Relativity*, *Evolution* (both 1923), and other ambitious subjects. In 1929 they made *Finding His Voice* for ERPI, an animated exposition of the operation of the Western Electric sound system that had a long career in both the theatrical and



Joseph Ruttenberg (hand on camera) shooting an industrial film for Squibb at the Eastern Service Studios, ca. 1933. Fort Lee Public Library.

the nontheatrical markets.<sup>147</sup> Such sponsored films would continue to be a lucrative sideline for the Fleischers. *A Jolt for General Germ* (1930) was their tribute to Lysol, and *My Merry Oldsmobile* (1931), ostensibly a promotional film for automobiles, was barely distinguishable from any other pre-Code Fleischer Talkartoon. According to Rick Prelinger, “the most interesting part was populated by bizarre, deformed, and licentious characters, creatures inspired by New York tenement life. These denizens, whose behavior and character were adapted from the vaudeville stage, looked like representatives of immigrant sub-cultures.”<sup>148</sup> The cosmopolitanism that marked many of New York’s theatrical talkies had apparently infected its nontheatrical films as well, at least at the Fleischer studio!

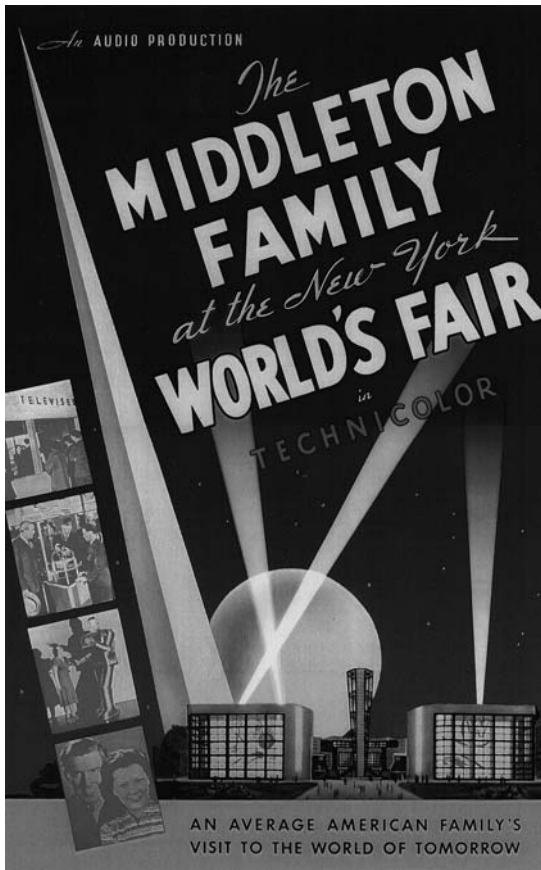
At first, audiences accepted these “sponsored theatricals” because of the novelty provided by any talking picture, and several major producers, notably Paramount, Warner Bros., and Fox (all then producing in New York), quickly became involved. Then in 1932, when the novelty had worn off, these same audiences “decided that they were being imposed upon with advertising matter when they paid for their tickets, and one day they hissed.”<sup>149</sup> Realizing that the income generated by these sponsored films was not worth the ill will they engendered, most exhibitors simply dropped them. From the producer’s point of view, however, there was still a lot of

business here. Five hundred major corporations were already operating their own motion picture departments by the mid-1920s, sponsoring and/or producing a variety of “industrial films.”<sup>150</sup>

In addition to major manufacturers like Ford, Dupont, and General Electric, many religious groups, public utilities, and even local governments had been putting money into such films for years. The advantages of sound for almost any educational film were by now generally acknowledged, and with the major producers cutting back their involvement, Western Electric’s non-telephone subsidiary ERPI sensed a vacuum in the market. In 1929, when sound was just entering the nontheatrical field, ERPI created an educational division to service the classroom market. Working with Columbia University Teachers College, it produced a series of teacher-training reels, first at the Fox studios and later at Paramount’s news-reel facility at 544 West 43rd Street near Eleventh Avenue (where Fred Waller was manager of Paramount’s industrial films division). Arthur Edwin Krows directed many of these, often at the rate of one single-reel subject per day, “straight lectures by educators who usually started seated at a library table, and then, as argument warmed up, arose and sat on the table.”<sup>151</sup> As with the early Vitaphone shorts, multiple cameras were used so that different angles and focal lengths could be intercut for the sake of variety.

Later subjects were a bit more complex. Ina Craig Sartorius demonstrated Binet-Simon I.Q. tests on pre-teen children, and Dr. Arnold Gesell of Yale presented his findings on infant and child behavior, achieved through the use of hidden-camera apparatus supplied by ERPI. In 1933 this educational film activity was taken over by ERPI Picture Consultants, Inc., and in 1938 by ERPI Classroom Films, Inc. It was a desire to cement control of the lucrative industrial film market that originally moved Western Electric to create Audio Productions, Inc. from the ruins of Audio-Cinema, an operation that eventually led to ERPI’s financing of theatrical features and shorts.<sup>152</sup>

Between March 1937 and March 1940 Audio produced at least eighty-eight industrial films at an average length of two reels (the equivalent of thirty hours of film). Clients included General Motors, Public Service Corporation of New Jersey (a transit provider that was an early adopter of soft-sell industrial films), Bakelite, and the National Association of Manufacturers.<sup>153</sup> Only four of these films were released theatrically, but one was the *Gone with the Wind* of industrial films, a Technicolor feature produced for Westinghouse called *The Middleton Family at the New York World’s Fair*. The family itself—Mom and Pop, Grandma, two sons, and a daughter—was an industrial film version of the “Jones Family,” another group of average Americans then appearing in a popular series of B pictures for 20th Century-Fox. In other words, the Middletons were modeled not on some abstract concept of the average American family but on Hollywood’s version of the average American family. The Middletons make the long journey from Indiana



Poster for the theatrical release of *The Middleton Family at the New York World's Fair* (Audio Productions, 1939).

to New York to take in the fair and are suitably impressed by its marvels; each sex and generation responds in culturally appropriate fashion. Of course, as director Bob Snody admitted, “the only commercial exhibit which came within range of the camera was the Westinghouse building.”<sup>154</sup>

### The World of Tomorrow

One of the highlights of the 1939 New York World's Fair was the Westinghouse Time Capsule, a permanent record of contemporary American life. Sealed up in 1938, it was not to be opened for five thousand years. In addition to the expected cultural artifacts (seeds, books, money), the capsule contained a specially edited RKO-Pathé newsreel and instructions, on microfilm, for building a projector.<sup>155</sup> This was one film, of course, that the Middletons would never see, but hundreds of others were available for viewing, an enormous nonfiction film festival running continuously in almost any building one chose to enter.<sup>156</sup> The 1939 New York World's

Fair, as Richard Griffith saw it, was “the best opportunity documentary has ever had . . . an unparalleled opportunity to show before all the world that it possesses a propagandist technique which has no equal among the expressive media.”<sup>157</sup>

The greatest continuing showcase for these documentaries was the Little Theatre in the Science and Education Building, one of the attractions mounted by the fair organizers instead of a commercial or governmental exhibitor. Here audiences could see Steiner and Van Dyke’s *The City*, a series of classic British documentaries (including some, like *Housing Problems*, too grim for Britain’s national exhibition), a special *March of Time* production called “Men of Medicine,” *The Spanish Earth*, *The 400,000,000*, the Pare Lorentz classics, and dozens of others. Another exhibit produced by the fair management (although presented by Chrysler at the last moment) was Raymond Loewy’s “Rocket Port,” a multimedia presentation for which the film element, *The History and Romance of Transportation*, was assembled by a crew from Frontier Films.<sup>158</sup> “Cunningly cut on lines of accelerated motion,” the film surveyed its subject from the earliest days to the present, a clever montage of pre-existing footage.<sup>159</sup> As the screening ended, the action shifted into the auditorium, where a miniature rocket was prepared for launching and fired off to London. Loewy also designed the models of futuristic transport vehicles that accompanied this show, although how closely he may have worked with the Frontier team is unknown.

That these commercial exhibits were intended as promotions should have surprised no one, although the ubiquity of this advertising was often as impressive as the films themselves. As Thomas Pryor wrote in the *New York Times*, “The blunt truth is that in Mr. Whalen’s World of Tomorrow the silver screen has been converted into a monster salesman.”<sup>160</sup> Of course, the international exhibits also tried to sell the products and ideologies of their sponsors. The Soviet Pavilion screened *Chapayev*, *Lenin in October*, and similar “documentary reconstructions,” films that had once been seen as models for New York’s own documentary community, but whose dependence on reenactment was starting to come under increasing criticism from filmmakers like Steiner and Van Dyke.

In a bizarre exercise that might not be believed if presented as fiction, the United States (Federal) Pavilion responded with *Land of Liberty*, a 137-minute historical compilation assembled by Cecil B. De Mille out of old Hollywood costume pictures. Professor James T. Shotwell, a Columbia University historian known for his interest in finding new ways to reach wider audiences, was the film’s nominal advisor. But even Shotwell was uncomfortable with De Mille’s vision of American history as an extended series of action sequences starring Gary Cooper, Tyrone Power, and other Hollywood celebrities. This was not *Fall of the Romanov Dynasty* or *Cry of the World*, where the raw material of history might lend a degree of authenticity to the final production. Instead, *Land of Liberty* was a historical fantasy cobbled together out of earlier historical fantasies.



Clearly entertaining—it was a great success at the fair and ran commercially until 1942—*Land of Liberty* was also a prime illustration of the growing gulf between East and West Coast filmmaking.<sup>161</sup> Where De Mille's film presented American history as a melodramatic costume party, the documentaries produced in New York—even the most fanciful of them—never used cinematic trickery as an end in itself; rather, they were primarily interested in persuading viewers to buy into some product, archetype, or ideology. In a sense, the use of films at the 1939 World's Fair can be viewed as an inversion of the established hierarchy of American cinema. Whereas the narrative fictions of Hollywood normally dominated, for a few months in Flushing Meadows nonfiction film was king, New York filmmakers were attracting all the audiences, and Hollywood and its product were either marginalized or struggling to keep up.

One of the films that audiences did line up for was itself a peculiar hybrid, a very commercial project made by a group of local filmmakers, some of whom would soon be working in Hollywood—at least until the blacklist caught up with them. Joseph Losey had been one of the creators of the Federal Theatre Project's innovative "Living Newspaper," a dramatization of reality not so different from the work of de Rochemont or Frontier Films. He had been appointed head of the Progressive Education Association's Experimental Film Project in November 1937, where he supervised the production of some two dozen short films intended to spark student debate on social science issues.<sup>162</sup> These films were condensations of Hollywood features, cut down by Helen van Dongen or Irving Lerner. The project made three separate shorts out of George Stevens's *Alice Adams*, for example, all of which "presented certain aspects of bourgeois family life to provoke discussion among students." The films were underwritten by the Rockefeller Foundation, and Losey worked "in the same building as Frontier Films," where he observed the work of Strand, Hurwitz, and Steiner.<sup>163</sup>

In 1938 Losey accepted a commission to direct the film that would be the centerpiece of the World's Fair's Petroleum Industry Exhibition, a twenty-minute Technicolor puppet animation called *Pete Roleum and His Cousins*. The crew was especially distinguished: Losey directing, Charles Bowers animating, and Helen van Dongen editing. The Bunins designed seventy-five puppets, Broadway designer Howard Bay contributed fifty sets, Hanns Eisler and Oscar Levant composed original music, and Hiram Sherman and Phil Baker provided the voices.<sup>164</sup> Despite the politics of most of those involved in making *Pete Roleum*, its sugar-coated message was completely reactionary: petroleum is the basis of Western civilization, and its production is a philanthropic endeavor on the part of the oil companies, which struggle for their penny of profit. As the script describes it, "Uncle Sam's arm reaches down and takes up a quarter and a dime. They disappear from the pile of coins, leaving only one penny [for the oil companies]."<sup>165</sup> The notion is almost a parody of Vertov and Soviet



agit-prop. In the end, *Pete Roleum* was one of the hits of the fair. Richard Griffith hailed the film as technically accomplished and quite clever in the way it masked its outrageous message with humor and fantasy, although he was clearly troubled about the use of this talent “in the interests of a phony apology for industry.”<sup>166</sup>

Losey continued to work on sponsored films, most of which were far more political than *Pete Roleum*. *A Child Went Forth*, produced for the National Association of Nursery Educators, employed a technical crew that came largely from Frontier Films (with Hanns Eisler again writing the score). *Youth Gets a Break* (also 1940) documented the accomplishments of the National Youth Administration. According to one of Losey’s biographers, it was “outright propaganda on behalf of the New Deal” and “very Soviet in mood.”<sup>167</sup>

### *The City*

Politically concerned filmmakers like Irving Lerner had always been worried that the demands of sponsorship could undermine any chance of true progressive analysis, no matter how enlightened the client. Willard Van Dyke and Ralph Steiner, working on *The City*, would have felt this responsibility far more intensely than someone like Joseph Losey. Pare Lorentz had originally been approached by the American Institute of Planners to present its vision of urbanization, but he had handed over the project after completing a basic outline. Not unlike *The Plough That Broke the Plains*, the new film would show how a natural ideal was corrupted by the greed of man and could be saved only through the cooperative efforts of society’s best minds. In this case the New England village is degraded into a “city of smoke,” clogged with congestion and automobiles. The solution is a “green city,” decentralized, with suburbs spreading endlessly in all directions and crumbling brownstones replaced by high-rise housing projects.

Henwar Rodakiewicz produced a treatment based on the Lorentz outline, and the team brought in Aaron Copland to compose the score and Lewis Mumford to supply the somewhat overheated narration, Van Dyke and Steiner made *The City* the apotheosis of prewar American documentary. “It is filled with tragedy, beauty, magnificence, ugliness, and sheer cinematic genius,” wrote local film critic Archer Winsten. “It will be a revelation and an education to the public. For the benefit of Hollywood, one would hope it would be the same to the West Coast treadmill athletes.”<sup>168</sup> A decade before, ERPI had filmed “educationals” with experts seated behind (or on) prop library desks. But parts of this film were so slick and appealing that at least one episode, an increasingly hectic montage of life in New York, was bought by Hollywood for use as stock footage.

Years later, the Museum of Modern Art would claim that the film’s “combination of a clearly developed personal style with an added commercial message established

one direction for sponsored documentaries in the U.S. for at least two decades.”<sup>169</sup> Still, one representative of the Carnegie Foundation, which was financing the film, would have been happier with something more traditional. According to Steiner, the man was so exasperated that he had to be carried out of the screening room and helped into a taxi while sputtering, “You have ruined us, you have thrown \$50,000 out the window, you have taken a serious subject and made fun of it.”<sup>170</sup>

But any humor in the film was hardly at the expense of city planning itself. Instead, what the man from Carnegie may have sensed was the absence of that air of absolute authority (and dead certainty) that marked an earlier generation of documentaries. The film showed a problem and offered a solution. How convincing it was—even to those who made it—was another matter. John Grierson, while praising the filmmakers for bringing “the American documentary film much closer to constructive social thinking,” grasped this ambiguity immediately. “I do not believe Steiner and Van Dyke believe a word of it any more than I do,” he said of the film’s central conceit, the replacement of a teeming urban lifestyle with one that is “neat and clean and tidy and utterly aseptic, with all the citizens practicing to be acrobats.” For Grierson, those scenes were “anemic,” hardly a match for the “lyrical up-bubbling life in those children playing dangerously on New York sidewalks.” Van Dyke and Steiner loved the city around them too much to take the dreams of the professional planners completely seriously. “Like myself,” Grierson concluded, “they are metropolitans.”<sup>171</sup>

Max Nosseck, second from left, with cast and crew of *Overture to Glory* at the Ideal studio in Hudson Heights, 1939. Camera-men Larry Williams and Don Malkames stand behind him. Museum of the Moving Image.



# 11

## Multicultural Revival

### Minority Cinema

Animation and nonfiction not only survived the meltdown of theatrical film production in the East, but prospered as never before. Short theatrical films would continue to be produced in significant numbers straight through 1941. What is more surprising is the way in which the ethnic and race film markets were able to bounce back from the debacle of 1932, not only improving in technical quality but also, in the case of the Yiddish film, entering what later historians would describe as a “golden age.”<sup>1</sup>

Although the exact circumstances of their production are unclear, Oscar Micheaux was able to put *The Phantom of Kenwood* and *Harlem after Midnight* into release during the bitter depression season of 1933–1934. (Unfortunately, neither appears to be extant today.)<sup>2</sup> Micheaux’s later films have often been ignored even by sympathetic critics, who feel that his independence was compromised when he turned for financing to exhibitors like Frank Schiffman, Leo Brecher, and Alfred Sack.<sup>3</sup> But even though some of the films he made during the late 1930s were conventional gangster melodramas laced with obligatory musical interludes, Micheaux continued to produce films that addressed the social and cultural concerns of the African American community in a style quite clearly his own. The major difference apparent in Micheaux’s later films is not their racial perspective but the increase in technical resources that this financial backing could supply.

*Murder in Harlem* (aka *Lem Hawkins’ Confession*) was released in 1935 and promoted as the “first story in which [Micheaux] will have adequate studio facilities and cast to do credit to his directorial genius.”<sup>4</sup> For the first time, Micheaux could freely

move the camera during direct dialogue recording and mix dialogue, music, and effects in postproduction, allowing him a degree of flexibility with image and sound obviously lacking in his earlier talkies. Conversations are edited with attention to reverse-angle cutting rules and other conventions of mainstream cinema. Although editing credits are lacking for many of Micheaux's films in this period, including *Murder in Harlem*, at least two of them (*God's Step Children* and *Swing!*) are credited to Patricia Rooney, once one of the most important editors at Paramount's Astoria studio. A decade earlier she had edited Valentino's *Monsieur Beaucaire* and Swanson's *The Humming Bird*. Now the collapse of the feature-film market meant that technicians like Rooney, and many other talented and experienced industry professionals, were available to producers like Micheaux.<sup>5</sup>

Micheaux would often work with bits and pieces of current events or popular books and films, taking what he needed and leaving the rest (resulting in what Matthew Bernstein calls "an exuberant bricolage").<sup>6</sup> *Murder in Harlem*, a remake of his 1921 feature *The Gunsaulus Mystery*, was a bizarre reimagining of the Leo Frank affair, for which Micheaux reversed many of the key racial identities.<sup>7</sup> The story begins when a potential romance between a girl and a young author who sells his own books door-to-door (as Micheaux had done) is foiled because of misunderstanding and the power of stereotype. Is the heroine a "good girl" or a "bad girl"? Years later the hero has become a lawyer, and the girl reenters his life, hiring him to defend her brother, a night watchman unjustly accused of the murder of a white woman. The

The downturn in major-studio production meant that Oscar Micheaux could hire the most experienced local technicians for films like *Swing!* (1938). Museum of the Moving Image.



focus of the narrative now shifts to Lem Hawkins, an uncultured “coon” figure (to use historian Donald Bogle’s term) whose lower-class temperament is very different from that of the strivers we have been asked to identify with earlier.<sup>8</sup> On one level, Hawkins is a character straight off the Harlem vaudeville stage, a shiftless figure of comedy to whom the film’s (black) audience is encouraged to feel superior. But after the white villain enlists Hawkins as part of a cover-up, the apparent fool steps entirely out of character and delivers a thoughtful aside directly to the camera. “That white man is got somethin’ up his sleeve,” he says to himself (or us—the staging is ambiguous). “He ain’t givin’ me all this money for nothin’. Anyway, I’m gonna try to get away with it.” Role-playing and duplicity infect this culture on all levels, Micheaux suggests, in the relationship between Hawkins and his employer no less than in that between the film’s nominal hero and heroine.<sup>9</sup>

Micheaux was often criticized at the time for the light skin/dark skin polarity explicit in his narratives. But here it is the dark Hawkins who emerges as the film’s most complex personality, thanks to the sophisticated performance of Alec Lovejoy, soon to become a Micheaux regular. The film is also noteworthy for Micheaux’s successful use of a complex flashback structure, a narrative device that previously had caused him endless amounts of trouble. Events surrounding the murder are recounted by various characters, and Micheaux plays with their reliability in surprisingly sophisticated fashion. Not only is the detective story well supported, but the problems in locating the truth in this “murder” episode also inform the romantic misunderstandings in the story of the two lovers.

In contrast to the attention his earliest talkies received, the trade press ignored the production of Micheaux’s later features, so it is difficult to know exactly where (or even when) these films were made. The *New York Amsterdam News* reported that *Murder in Harlem* was being shot at the Photocolor studio in Irvington-on-Hudson.<sup>10</sup> Actor Lorenzo Tucker remembered that *Temptation* (1936) was shot at a studio in Fort Lee (probably the Ideal studio in Hudson Heights, the only one in the area advertising for business that year), but Micheaux could have been using any number of rental studios in New Jersey or the Bronx.<sup>11</sup> In 1937 George Randol and Ralph Cooper revived the race film market with *Dark Manhattan*, which they produced in Hollywood. Although an increasing number of these films would subsequently be shot in California, Texas, or Florida, Micheaux continued to work out of New York. *The Notorious Elinor Lee* and *Lying Lips* (both shot in 1939) appear to have been made at the Biograph studio in the Bronx, another curious link between Micheaux and D. W. Griffith.

By that point Micheaux had a new partner, Colonel Hubert Fauntleroy Julian, a self-promoting aviator known as “The Black Eagle,” who claimed to be the former air marshal of Ethiopia. It was probably Julian, not Micheaux, who attracted the attention of *Time* magazine just before the gala Harlem opening of *Elinor Lee* in January 1940. Their new film was a prizefight melodrama in which the Joe Louis–



style hero must overcome the “aryan mentality” of a German opponent clearly modeled on Max Schmelling. “I am going to devote my life now to improving the place of the Negro in motion pictures,” Julian announced. “I am trying to build up the morals of my race.” The flashy Julian was clearly Micheaux’s mouthpiece here, with the “mild-mannered” director content to remain firmly in the background.<sup>12</sup>

Micheaux himself had always been an uplifter. Films like *Birthright*, in which he foregrounded the struggle for black education, and *God’s Step Children* (both 1938), for which the advertising specifically invoked both *Imitation of Life* and *These Three*, made it clear that he was still the only race film producer for whom hot-button social issues remained a principal concern. At the same time, Julian’s promotion of such conventional melodramas as *Lying Lips* and *The Notorious Elinor Lee* suggests the sort of pressure now bearing down on the entire race film industry.

Hollywood legend has it that producer Sam Goldwyn once said that if he had a message to send, he would use Western Union. Micheaux never learned this lesson, and his good intentions never went unpunished. At its premiere in May 1938, *God’s Step Children* was picketed by the Young Communist League and its allies, denounced for even raising the issue of color consciousness within the African American community. After two days of negotiation with various pressure groups, the film was pulled from exhibition at the RKO Regent, then banned from the entire RKO chain. Micheaux had already made a series of cuts to the picture and had announced before each screening that the protesters had forced him to “delete the offensive portions of the play.” But that was not enough. Desperate to maintain his professional standing, Micheaux also made a public confession of his “errors” and agreed to submit all his future work to an oversight committee organized by the National Negro Congress.<sup>13</sup> This disgraceful episode, far more than any alliance with Jack Goldberg or Frank Schiffman, destroyed the possibility of artistic and intellectual independence in Micheaux’s cinema. The following year Micheaux began a lengthy self-imposed exile from filmmaking and returned to his first love, writing and selling books.

What little competition Micheaux had in the local race film market during this period was no longer following his lead but instead copying the successful formula of Ralph Cooper’s Hollywood-produced gangster melodramas. Creative Cinema Corporation was obviously using films like *Dark Manhattan* as the model for the series of urban crime films it released in 1938, all directed by Irwin Franklyn, including *Sugar Hill Baby*, *Policy Man*, and *Gone Harlem*. Count Basie made his feature-film debut in the best known of these, *Policy Man*, which starred Micheaux regular Ethel Moses and Jimmy Baskette. Baskette would later win a special Academy Award for his portrayal of “Uncle Remus” in Walt Disney’s *Song of the South*. Franklyn also wound up in Hollywood, producing low-budget features like *Delinquent Daughters* for Producers Releasing Corporation.

*Moon over Harlem* (1939), another tale of the Harlem protection rackets, was shot in two days in “an old cigar warehouse” in New Jersey, according to director

Edgar G. Ulmer.<sup>14</sup> This incredibly cheap musical was Ulmer's only attempt at a race feature after his considerable success with Yiddish and Ukrainian pictures. While Micheaux's films were costing between \$10,000 and \$20,000 each in this period, Ulmer made *Moon over Harlem* for a lot less. "There couldn't have been \$8,000 in cash in there," Ulmer remembered. "I knew that the singers, we had over fifty of them, were paid 25 cents a day and they had to travel back to Harlem and over to Jersey. It was one of the most pitiful things I ever did."<sup>15</sup> Forced to use many nonprofessionals, Ulmer rehearsed them for two weeks to achieve a naturalistic "Rossellini style," quite different from the theatrically grounded performances found in his Yiddish pictures. Star power was provided through a brief appearance by Sidney Bechet.

By the late 1930s, race film production was no longer identifiably regional. Micheaux stayed in New York, drawing on local talent and facilities, but other producers were already operating on a national level. Alfred Sack, who was making most of his films in Texas with Spencer Williams, was also behind several of Micheaux's pictures, as well as *The Devil's Daughter*, a 1939 voodoo comedy with Nina Mae McKinney shot by a New York crew in Kingston, Jamaica. That same year Harry Popkin's Los Angeles-based Million Dollar Productions backed another Nina Mae McKinney feature in New York, *Straight to Heaven*. The two films are connected mainly through the cinematography of Jay Rescher, a local cameraman who also shot *Keep Punching* (1939), in which welterweight champion Henry Armstrong was typecast as a promising young welterweight.

*Keep Punching* cribbed shamelessly from both Clifford Odets's *Golden Boy* and the 1938 Joe Louis film *Spirit of Youth*. After graduation the hero disregards the advice of "Professor Washington" to study law and begins a career as a professional prizefighter. Just before the big fight he ignores the instructions of his manager and trainer (Canada Lee in a small part) and nearly succumbs to the temptations of the big city. But he is saved from a lethal Mickey Finn by the quick thinking of the film's pop-eyed comic relief, played by Hamtree Harrington. Dooley Wilson, three years before *Casablanca*, is quite effective as Baron Skinner, a swaggering political blowhard (and club owner!) whose lack of sincerity is mocked by J. Rosamond Johnson and Marcy Klauber's script. Johnson, who appears in the film and plays a crucial role at the climax, also wrote most of the film's music, including "Lift Every Voice and Sing," used here as a sort of anthem for black achievement in the Booker T. Washington tradition. Well produced at the Film Art (Edison) studio, *Keep Punching* suffers mainly from the uneven direction of producer John Clein.

The retreat from regionalism in the production of race films was made very clear in an extensive interview Jack Goldberg gave the *New York Times* in 1941.<sup>16</sup> Goldberg's International Roadshows, Inc. was then the largest player in the race film market and in just the past year had produced three features in Hollywood, two in Florida, and one, *Paradise in Harlem*, in Fort Lee. Regional variations had all but disappeared. Indeed, *Sunday Sinners* and *Murder on Lenox Avenue*, the "Florida"

pictures, were made by union crews from New York, including cameraman George Webber and art director William Sauter, both veterans of Paramount's Astoria studio. Like Oscar Micheaux, Goldberg may have seen Harlem and Chicago as his key markets, but he also understood the necessity of deploying his talent and money in the most cost-effective manner.

The way in which this lack of centralized production could actually make films more personal (and less formulaic) can be seen in *Paradise in Harlem* (1940), probably the last feature-length race picture made in New York before the war. Frank Wilson had created the role of "Porgy" in 1927 and later wrote New York's first Federal Theatre production, *Walk Together, Chillum*. He was also a veteran of Micheaux's films and had played the gambler murdered by Paul Robeson in Dudley Murphy's *Emperor Jones*. During the 1940–1941 season Wilson not only acted in all of Goldberg's East Coast films, but also wrote all of the scripts. Although each film is set against the obligatory background of urban crime, *Paradise in Harlem*, produced as *Othello in Harlem*, shows how a clever dramatist could use the strictures of genre to support his own interests instead of merely pandering to presumed audience demands.

Wilson stars as a burned-out veteran of the black theater who is tired of "playing Uncle Tom all my life." When we first see him, he is headlining a nightspot in Harlem, costumed in the top hat, tail coat, and heavy blackface of Bert Williams. What he really wants to do is to play Othello (it would be 1942 before Paul Robeson would bring his own production to Broadway). Wilson is forced to leave town after witnessing a gang killing, and as he flees deeper into the southern heartland, his personal decline is mirrored by his professional "fall" through the hierarchy of black entertainment, down to low-class vaudeville and honky-tonk piano playing. Shattered and on the verge of alcoholism, Wilson is located and called back to New York by friends who set him up with a church group's theatrical club. He decides to stage *Othello*. After a series of melodramatic obstacles, the play finally reaches the public, which rejects it out of hand. The handkerchief scene is heckled mercilessly. But the actors, most of them amateurs who know less about classical theater than street theater, begin to improvise. In one of the most remarkable passages in race movies, they gradually replace Shakespeare's Elizabethan idiom (the popular theater of its day) with something approaching a blues recitative. The audience understands and is electrified, literally dancing in the aisles. Wilson's dream is realized, not the way he had imagined—a sort of museological display of high culture—but as a fusion of classical drama and contemporary sensibility.

*Paradise in Harlem* is almost an encyclopedia of African American theater, packing more cultural history into one film than even Dudley Murphy ever attempted. Although obviously informed by stage productions like *The Hot Mikado* and Orson Welles's *Macbeth*, Wilson's script does not simply replay a classic in blackface, but attempts to find a logical connection between the theater of Shakespeare's day and

modern African American stage (and screen) practice. The film was directed by Joseph Seiden, probably because he was already connected with Goldberg and had studio space available in New Jersey. An experienced director of low-budget ethnic cinema, Seiden certainly knew how to move the film along and get the most out of his actors, but the text seems to have been Frank Wilson's responsibility.

### The Yiddish New Wave

It seems ironic that Joseph Seiden's most successful ethnic film was not one of the Yiddish talkies he made in such quantity during the 1930s. After getting back into the business with Yiddish Talking Pictures in 1935, he had continued to produce and/or direct films like *Love and Sacrifice* with Lazar Freed (1936), *Motel the Operator* with Chaim Tauber (1939), and *Eli Eli* with Esther Field (1940)—quintessential Yiddish family melodramas. When the opportunity arose, Seiden might even package up his outtakes and squeeze another film out of the same material.<sup>17</sup> Budgets were low, but so were expectations. At first Seiden continued to work in the cramped studio at 33 West 60th Street that had been inadequate even during the early talkie period. According to Eric Goldman, the studio "was not certified by the Fire Department," forcing the company to work only when the building was vacant, at night or over the weekend. Heat from the lamps was intolerable. "Everybody in the crew used to be stripped to the waist and they used to have a towel on [a] cake of ice," Seiden's son Harold remembered. "When they got full of sweat they used to take that cold towel to keep themselves cool."<sup>18</sup> Because laboratories charged \$5 or \$10 to process fade-outs and other optical effects, Seiden made his own by hand-dipping the original negative in a vat of potassium ferrocyanide.<sup>19</sup> In 1939 he began working with Don Malkames at the old Ideal studio in Fort Lee. Budgets improved (he remembered them as ranging from \$9,000 to \$65,000), but the quality of the films remained about the same.<sup>20</sup>

Critic J. Hoberman dismisses the bulk of Seiden's output as *schund*, sentimental theatrical drivel that was already giving Yiddish theater a bad name.<sup>21</sup> Goldman, somewhat more forgiving, gives Seiden credit for longevity and perseverance ("He was there at the beginning and he was there at the end") but little else: "His films cannot in any way compare with other work produced with higher budgets. . . . His actors were professionals; surely, with better direction, camerawork, sets and greater opportunity to reshoot scenes, they would have given better performances."<sup>22</sup> Yet even Seiden's films are generally acknowledged to be far more accomplished than those of his chief rival, Henry Lynn, another specialist in family melodrama (*Where Is My Child?* [1937], *Mothers of Today* [1939]). "Lynn never managed to master the art of directing," Judith Goldberg insists, "and *Bar Mitzvah* [1935] is possibly the worst Yiddish film ever made. . . . Only the medium shots are in focus [while] under the

dialogue is the noise of the camera.”<sup>23</sup> Still, budgets aren’t everything, as Edgar G. Ulmer’s Yiddish films clearly demonstrate.

On July 5, 1936, the *New York Times* ran a story on the wide range of foreign-language films available to New Yorkers, listing the theaters where French, Swedish, and Polish films were regularly screened and estimating the average attendance. “In contrast to the popularity of Yiddish spoken drama in New York,” the *Times* noted, “movies in that language are few and far between. A couple of worth-while films made in Palestine and in the Soviet Union and one or two manufactured here have had brief runs to fairly good houses. At present, plans are being made for the systematic production of Yiddish talkies in this country.”<sup>24</sup> Ironically, what did kick-start the production of Yiddish talkies in America was a Polish film, *Yidl mitn Fidl*, then being produced in Warsaw by Joseph Green. It opened in Poland in September 1936 and by New Year’s Eve was playing not on Delancey Street but on Broadway. Green’s film quickly became “the first truly international Yiddish hit,” cleverly trading on the music and comedy of American favorite Molly Picon.<sup>25</sup>

*Yidl mitn Fidl* turned its back on the immigrant sagas characteristic of American ethnic cinema, instead incorporating the Polish countryside as a dominant motif. Picon and her traveling players wander through a landscape that earlier Yiddish films could only imagine. After 1936, films made during the “golden age” of Yiddish cinema in America would gradually focus more and more on the Old Country. Some of them would be made on location there by producers like Green, a Polish actor who had been working in America since 1924 and had returned to Warsaw seeking authenticity and affordable technical expertise. The rest would be shot on sets reconstructed to order in New York and New Jersey.

Edgar G. Ulmer is often given credit for the revitalization of the Yiddish film in America, but he came to Yiddish cinema through his work on a Ukrainian-language picture.<sup>26</sup> After the *Warning Shadow* fiasco of 1932, Ulmer had returned to Hollywood, where he directed *The Black Cat* (1934) for Universal, a remarkable demonstra-

Yiddish film director Joseph Seiden working on location in Fort Lee in 1939. Cinematographer Don Malkames stands to the right of the camera. Fort Lee Historical Society.





tion of the possibilities of low-budget filming. More recently, he had been directing in Canada and working with his sister and brother-in-law in the newsreel business in New York. Stories vary, but in 1936 Ulmer somehow became involved with Vasile Avramenko's production of *Natalka Poltavka*, the film adaptation of a Ukrainian operetta originally produced in 1818. Avramenko, a key figure in the dissemination of Ukrainian music and dance in North America, appealed to Ukrainian folk groups throughout Canada and the United States to participate in the film both as performers and as investors. Further backing came from labor unions with large numbers of Ukrainian members.<sup>27</sup> Avramenko assembled some \$18,000 in cash through these fraternal associations and promoted a significant amount of free labor. Ulmer remembered agreeing to work for thirty-five dollars a week as associate producer, helping to put the script into shape and assisting the nominal director, Leo Bulgakov.

What happened at this point is unclear. Ulmer claimed that Bulgakov was forced out by the investors after three days and that he finished the film himself. The existing print credits Avramenko with the direction, M. J. Gann with "production supervision," and both Ulmer and Gann with "motion picture direction." Interiors were shot at the Biograph studio, and music tracks were recorded for playback on location, allowing a tremendous degree of flexibility in staging for what was still an extremely low-budget production. Avramenko had located a farm in Flemington, New Jersey, where volunteer carpenters created the city of Poltava. Leading parts were played by professional opera soloists, but Ulmer was dubious about Avramenko's ability to recruit the hundreds of extras needed to populate this city. "Then on Sunday night when I came back to the farm, there were cars with license plates from all over America and Canada. . . . He had never told me that every one of these groups in these cities and villages had a dancing teacher and for years the kids not only learned how to dance these things, but their mothers sewed the costumes!"<sup>28</sup>

The division of directorial responsibility between Ulmer and Avramenko (or M. J. Gann, whoever he might be) was remarkably successful. The musical ensembles are very impressive, the costuming and decor far more elaborate than anyone might reasonably expect. Ulmer's camera lingers over these landscapes, supporting or illustrating the musical texts and occasionally providing visual echoes of the work of Ukrainian artist and filmmaker Alexander Dovzhenko (several of whose films had recently been screened in and around New York). "The picture had one thing which I could never recapture again," Ulmer remembered, "the enthusiasm of that mad bunch. It showed on the screen."<sup>29</sup> Although the Soviet film industry had just sent over its own adaptation of this same operetta, the *New York Times* preferred the local production, which had "more funny incidents and is photographed much better."<sup>30</sup> Ulmer himself suggested that his work on these Ukrainian and Yiddish films was that of *bild regisseur*. "[T]here were two directors in each picture: a director for the dramatic action and for the actors, and then the director for the picture itself who established the camera angles, camera movements, etc.; there had to be teamwork."<sup>31</sup>



The production model provided by *Natalka Poltavka*, and the success of *Yidl mitn Fidl*, led Ulmer to join with Roman Rebush and Ludwig Landy in Collective Film Producers, a partnership that would soon revolutionize the entire Yiddish cinema genre. Joseph Green had achieved a new level of authenticity by taking his cameras out onto the streets of Poland. Collective also hoped to capture the look and feel of the Old Country, but on its budgets urban settings were out of the question. The films would have to be pastorals. So in the summer of 1937 Ulmer again found himself scouting locations in New Jersey, this time for an adaptation of Peretz Hirschbein's Yiddish theater favorite *Grine Felder* (*Green Fields*).

J. Hoberman suggests that Collective was not just another film producer, but a conscious participant in "the culture of the Popular Front."<sup>32</sup> Instead of premiering at a conventional Yiddish venue, the company's first film opened at a midtown art house managed by Workers Film and Photo League stalwart Edward Kern, on a double bill with *China Strikes Back*. Support from journals like the *Daily Worker* and a variety of culturally active trade unions made the production of *Green Fields* seem closer to New York's left-labor documentary movement than to any of its ethnic predecessors. The direction was certainly a collective effort. Jacob Ben-Ami had long been associated with Hirschbein's play onstage but was now too old to play the lead; he signed on to co-direct with Ulmer, who spoke no more Yiddish than Ukrainian. Herschel Bernardi, who made his first film appearance in *Green Fields*, confirmed to Eric Goldman that the same division of labor seen on *Natalka Poltavka* was operating here. Ben-Ami "was the dramatic person," while Ulmer "worked with the technicians, choosing shots and locations. He showed the actors, few of whom had ever acted before in front of a camera, how to react with film and how to move."<sup>33</sup> If Ulmer was still the *bild regisseur*, Jacob Ben-Ami, in Hoberman's terms, now functioned as *dramaturg*.

If anything, the financing of *Green Fields* was even more of a collective effort than the production of *Natalka Poltavka*. In a depression-era equivalent of paying for the film on credit cards, Ulmer and his associates raised money from the Household Finance Company by mortgaging their own furniture, kited as many laboratory charges as possible, and finally turned to the International Ladies' Garment Workers Union for completion money.<sup>34</sup> All this scrimping allowed Ulmer to buy only 15,000 feet of negative, forcing a shooting ratio, he claimed, of 1.25 to 1. What made it possible to work so close to the bone was Ulmer's association with J. Burgi Contner, then operating the Producers Service studio in Grantwood. Goldman suggests that Contner had been given a share of the profits, although it seems likely that he also offered a reasonable package deal of camera, sound, and studio facilities.

What Contner had was the first Mitchell BNC, a radical improvement on the industry's standard camera, which contained its own silencing system and a parallax-free viewfinder. The camera was far less bulky than earlier "blimped" models and much easier to operate with assurance, especially in the field.<sup>35</sup> Because Ulmer

could film dialogue sequences outdoors without the technical apparatus getting in the way, the audience feels as if it has discovered these people and their little village, and the ordinary events of daily life flow naturally around them. In contrast to most Yiddish films, which traded on the star system inherited from the Yiddish theater, no actors are named on the poster for *Green Fields*, a curious way of selling the picture by stressing ensemble over personality. And unlike the forceful, Dovzhenko-inspired effects of *Natalka Poltavka*, Ulmer's new film was more reminiscent of Jean Renoir or Paul Fejos's *Marie, légende hongroise* (1932).

Despite the critical and commercial success of *Green Fields*, Collective Film Producers found it no easier to raise financing for its subsequent Yiddish film, *The Singing Blacksmith*. Ulmer located another New Jersey farm, this time in the shadow of the Benedictine monastery in Newton, where he built an even larger (if less convincing) Ukrainian village.<sup>36</sup> With nothing in the budget for an electrical generator, he tapped into the local utility lines. What money there was paid for a star, Moishe Oysher, who was already associated with a tradition of cantorial musicals. If the nostalgic *Green Fields* celebrated the lost world of Hirschbein's imagination, *The Singing Blacksmith* celebrated Oysher. Indeed, Ulmer's greatest achievement here was not as a director, but as a producer, demonstrating his ability to make back-to-back ethnic films on the same location—for two different ethnicities!

According to Ulmer, it had always been his intention to film *The Singing Blacksmith* and *Cossacks in Exile*, a Ukrainian picture, one right after the other, on the same sets. Indeed, this plan had led to problems in finding a location; only the Benedictine monks proved amenable to allowing both Jews and Ukrainians on their land (the bearded brothers also agreed to work as extras in both pictures).<sup>37</sup> Avramenko again functioned as producer and promoter on the Ukrainian film, and the mysterious Michael J. Gann also returned from *Natalka Poltavka* (although the musical performers were almost entirely different). Ulmer officially directed *The Singing Blacksmith* himself, although, according to Eric Goldman, writer and actor Ben-Zvi Barattoff, "the elder on the set, did help wherever he could."<sup>38</sup>

The production teams responsible for *The Singing Blacksmith* and *Cossacks in Exile* overlap very closely in the technical departments, but not at all where the writing and acting are concerned. Ulmer directed both films and was probably responsible for the (uncredited) production design. Jack Kemp, who also worked for Oscar Micheaux, edited both of them. Bill Miller, who shot *Green Fields*, photographed both of them. Edwin Schabbeharr and Edward Fenton, credited on various Yiddish and race movies in the late 1930s, were the sound recordists on *The Singing Blacksmith* (and possibly on *Cossacks in Exile*, which has no sound credit). This entire group moved from one production to the next without blinking an eye. In fact, they were lucky to find the work: not a single conventional feature film was made in the East that summer.

"Once again the Ukrainian-Americans working under the able direction of Vasile Avramenko have turned out a made-in-New Jersey film operetta that is

highly agreeable both to the eye and the ear,” beamed the *New York Times*.<sup>39</sup> Indeed, the market for domestically produced Ukrainian-language films appeared to be flourishing. Leo Bulgakov, who may have been the original director of Avramenko’s first film, made *Marusia* in the summer of 1938, filming at locations all over the New York–New Jersey area, with studio work at the Eastern Service Studios in Astoria.<sup>40</sup> *Marusia* was a nineteenth-century melodrama of fatal passions and twisted revenge, a curious choice for a man with Bulgakov’s resume. He had been associated with the Moscow Art Theatre for fifteen years before defecting during its 1926 American tour and striking out on his own. Although Bulgakov succeeded in staging a few noteworthy productions, he later worked mainly as an actor (he was in the original company of *Street Scene*) before somehow landing a director’s contract at Columbia in 1934–1935.<sup>41</sup> But with Avramenko continuing to dominate the market for Ukrainian-language features, there was little room for Bulgakov, or anyone else. In 1940 Avramenko produced the last Ukrainian American film, a nationalistic documentary called *The Tragedy of Carpatho-Ukraine*, which dealt with the autonomous Ukrainian region established on former Czech territory in 1938. Whether Avramenko included any dramatized footage in this lost film or simply assembled the picture from newsreel material is unclear.<sup>42</sup>

The Ukrainians were not the only group to enter the market during this second wave of ethnic film production. *Arshin-mal-alan* (1937) was produced and directed for Marana Films, Inc. by Setrag Vartian (who also co-starred, with Louise Barsamian). Also known as *The Vagabond Lover* or *The Peddler Lover*, it told of a young man who disguises himself below his station to avoid an arranged marriage and then wanders the countryside in search of true love. The *New York Times* referred to it as being based on “a Persian operetta,” but New York State censorship records describe it as “Turkish,” and the *American Film Institute Catalog* lists it as “Armenian language.” Production circumstances suggest it was very similar in character to the Ukrainian and Yiddish films made in the East during this period, although the exact location of its production is unknown.<sup>43</sup>

### Fast Fade

The production of ethnic and race films in New York and New Jersey peaked just before World War II, then shut down entirely for the duration. When the war ended, the infrastructure, the economy, and the talent were all in place to pick up where things had left off. Independent producers once more had access to raw stock and laboratory facilities, both of which had been heavily regulated since 1941. But the postwar world was a very different place, and the markets had changed in dramatic and unpredictable fashion.

Although some race film producers, including Oscar Micheaux (*The Betrayal*,

1948) and William Alexander (*Souls of Sin*, 1949), returned with even more ambitious work, the racial integration of Hollywood films and the emergence of crossover stars like Lena Horne and Dorothy Dandridge marked the end of the segregated race film industry. For their part, Yiddish producers suffered from a declining home market as well as the catastrophic situation in Central Europe, but looked to a new audience in the postwar state of Israel. "We had great hopes of distribution in Palestine," Joseph Seiden wrote in 1949, after making his first Yiddish films in almost a decade, "but this was denied us because of the ban on Yiddish dialogue in favor of Hebrew, the country's national language."<sup>44</sup> Indeed, the prewar tradition of racial and ethnic film production, for all groups, would come to an end by 1950. Seen in that context, the Yiddish films made in New York in 1939, with their foreshadowings of extinction and assimilation, look more like omens than entertainment.

The darkest of these films, Edgar G. Ulmer's *The Light Ahead*, is the antithesis of the idyllic Jewish pastoral he had created in *Green Fields*. According to Hoberman, this "Chasidic gothic" romance "offers the only negative view of the *shtetl* to be found in an American Yiddish movie. . . . The life of the town is depicted as miserable and degrading, religion shown to be self-serving and hypocritical—even the dietary laws have been perverted by commerce."<sup>45</sup> Much of the film takes place at night or on stylized interior settings photographed by J. Burgi Contner at his New Jersey studio.<sup>46</sup> Ulmer himself is credited with the design of these sets, which look back to the shadowy expressionism of *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (or his own *The Black Cat*). No Renoir effects here. When the village maidens bathe in the local stream, they spread a cholera epidemic throughout the community. According to local elders, the plague can be stopped only by marrying the village's two most misbegotten residents in the graveyard at midnight. The fact that the disaster at least brings some benefit for the two impoverished lovers was seen as a hopeful sign by New York critics, who reviewed the film just as the Germans and Soviets completed their assault on Poland. The *New York Times* even cited the "reassuring message it contains for world Jewry," although the conclusion, which shows the newlyweds abandoning their village in search of an ambiguous future elsewhere, is cold comfort at best.<sup>47</sup>

In the summer of 1939 the *Times* published a story about the filming of another Yiddish pastoral manqué, *Tevya*, on location at a potato farm just east of Jericho, Long Island. Maurice Schwartz, the producer, director, and star of the picture (he had also written the adaptation of Sholom Aleichem's *Tevye der Milkhiker* on which the film was based), was determined to spend whatever was needed. "You can't hope to pass off a cheap, inferior picture, even if it's in Yiddish, on audiences today," Schwartz insisted.<sup>48</sup> The budget was a reputed \$70,000—enormous for an ethnic film production—and clearly intended to bolster *Tevya*'s crossover appeal. Where Ulmer was using newsreel personnel who could work fast and cheap, Schwartz had hired Larry Williams as cameraman and William Sauter as art director (a few

years earlier they had been working for George Cukor). Saulter's crews adapted the existing structures on the farm to mimic the architecture of Ukraine. "We never suspected the walls of the cowshed were anything but stone until a property man boastfully called our attention to his handiwork," the *Times* admitted.

Unlike the Ulmer films, *Tevya* is the story not of a Jewish community but of one Jewish family isolated in a Ukrainian sea. The film begins in sunshine, with Tevya, his wife, and youngest daughter living in apparent equanimity with their non-Jewish neighbors. But the film soon darkens, shifting largely to nighttime shots and interiors, when assimilation and anti-Semitism threaten the existence of this family and the traditions it represents. Tevya, who would prefer his daughter Chavah dead than married to a Ukrainian, is moved to question the very existence of God when she does indeed marry the peasant next door. Things go downhill rapidly. The best Ukrainians spend most of their time drinking and fiddling, like grasshoppers in a Disney cartoon. Having absorbed Chavah into their priest-ridden culture, they reduce her to the level of a servant. The rest of the population soon drives the Jew from his own land, brandishing an anti-Semitic ukase. Even Chavah's apparently loving husband, true to type, will not stand up for her and her family. Rejecting America—they don't speak his language there—Tevya considers his options. "We can either go to Argentina, Palestine, or the Holy Land," he calculates before packing up his possessions and bidding good riddance to the illusory notion of any sort of life alongside the *goyim*.

A great commercial success (critic J. Hoberman later called it the "Yiddish analogue" to *Gone with the Wind*), *Tevya* is in some ways even more troubling than *The Light Ahead*.<sup>49</sup> As Eric Goldman points out, there is no equivalent in Sholom Aleichem's story for this Tevya's wish for his children, that he would "rather see them perish than see them betray our faith" through intermarriage. "One can only wonder," Goldman notes, "whether Schwartz is asking his audience to agree with

Maurice Schwartz directing *Tevya* (1939) on location on Long Island. Cameraman Larry Williams stands behind him. Museum of the Moving Image.





it.”<sup>50</sup> In fact, Schwartz leaves little option for thinking otherwise. Tevya is right to warn his daughter against having anything to do with these feckless gentiles, who are no better than the white folks in an Oscar Micheaux picture. His daughter is a fool for not understanding this, and the whole family pays the price. The time for assimilationist fairy tales is over.

The sudden collapse of the Yiddish and race film business was a surprise to nearly everyone, even after the start of the war. As late as January 30, 1940, *Variety* headlined a supposed “Negro and Yiddish Film Boom.” In fact, the last major Yiddish film, *Overture to Glory*, a sort of anti-*Jazz Singer* in which the star rejects the stage in favor of the synagogue, opened in New York only a week later. *Overture to Glory* was based on the true story of Vilna’s most famous cantor, whose crossover success on the Warsaw concert stage ultimately led to an unhappy end. The film was produced on a modest budget at the Ideal studio in Hudson Heights, photographed by Larry Williams and Don Malkames, and directed by Max Nosseck, a recent émigré who did not even have proper working papers. Nosseck was a minor-league Edgar Ulmer. Both were secular Jews born in the last years of the Austro-Hungarian Empire (Nosseck two years later, in 1904); both studied art in Vienna, took various jobs in the theater, and then worked on the fringes of the motion picture industry. During the 1930s Nosseck made multiple-language features for Paramount in France and claimed to have directed the first talking pictures in Dutch and Portuguese. At the time, his best-known film was Buster Keaton’s *Le roi des Champs Elysees* (1934). Nosseck later made a number of interesting low-budget films in Hollywood, notably *Dillinger* (1945). He died in 1972, the same year as Ulmer.

Like *Tevya*, *Overture to Glory* was a lesson in the evils of assimilation, this time focusing on the upper levels of Polish society and the international music scene. Nosseck, who saw the film as his ticket to Hollywood, gave it the shape and style of an MGM biopic, somehow delivering “sophisticated chiaroscuro and a reasonably developed film language” on a budget of \$20,000.<sup>51</sup> The film was well cast, with Moishe Oysher as the cantor and Helen Beverly, the dark beauty of *Green Fields* and *The Light Ahead*, as the Polish countess who distracts the hero from his true calling. At the end of the film the cantor finally comes to his senses and returns to the synagogue on the eve of Yom Kippur, delivering one last Kol Nidre before dying at the altar. “For them, you sang. For us, you prayed,” the rabbi concludes, gently underscoring this lesson in the impossibility of trying to live a life in two worlds. As with *Tevya* and *The Light Ahead*, the lesson is bitter, and the audience is left with very faint hope for the future.

Production of Yiddish films ceased in 1940, largely due to the effect of the war in Europe. But how anyone could have continued to develop this genre after audiences began seeing films like these is difficult to imagine.



Milton Berle in *Poppin' the Cork* (1933), produced by Educational Pictures, Inc. soon after it moved the bulk of its operation to the Eastern Service Studio in Astoria. Museum of the Moving Image.



# 12

## A Miniature Hollywood

### Short Story, 1933–1941

If the local motion picture industry had had to depend on feature films alone, every studio in New York and New Jersey would have gone out of business for good by the mid-1930s. In one annual survey, *Film Daily* asserted that “no feature productions were made in the East” during the 1936–1937 season, and the editors saw no hope of any being made in the foreseeable future.<sup>1</sup> Of course, they were not counting marginal genres like Yiddish pictures and race movies, but even these specialized markets were not strong enough to keep the local craft unions afloat on their own. Yet, while it was true that New York had lost the feature-film business, local filmmakers continued to operate quietly all around the edges of the industry. *Film Daily* may have thought that nothing was happening here, but in fact there was just enough of this marginal activity to support the unions, the studios, and the equipment houses—an infrastructure that would be ready and waiting just in case some producer did want to make feature pictures in New York again. And of all the marginal genres that managed to keep local production alive during this period, the most successful was one that had hardly existed here a decade earlier: the production of theatrical shorts.

Those same *Film Daily* surveys that charted the collapse of local feature production told a very different tale when it came to the short-film business. After the slump of 1932–1933, approximately 175 shorts were produced “in and about New York” during 1934–35. The figure jumped to 280 the following year and 300 during 1936–1937.<sup>2</sup> Three hundred short films—in addition to cartoons and newsreels—is a

considerable number, the equivalent of 60 or 70 feature pictures. Yet this significant body of work had little status in its own day and remains almost totally forgotten today. A director like Joseph Henabery, who had come east to work for Sam Sax at Warners in 1931, felt that the eight busy years he spent in Brooklyn caused the rest of the industry to forget him. Hollywood had moved on, and Henabery saw himself marginalized, tainted by association with the two-reel comedies and one-reel musicals he helped create.<sup>3</sup> Today, when cartoons, race movies, and even exploitation pictures are the subject of academic theses, there is still no revisionist school devoted to "Broadway Brevities" or Tom Patricola comedies.

The three hundred live-action shorts made in New York in 1936–1937 were almost one-third of the total number produced in the United States that year.<sup>4</sup> Warner Bros. made one hundred of them at the Vitaphone studio in Brooklyn; seventy-six were made by Educational at the General Service Studios in Astoria for release through 20th Century-Fox; thirty Van Beuren shorts for RKO release, thirteen Universal "Mentone Musicals," and ten Columbia shorts produced by B. K. Blake were all made at the Biograph studio. At the Film Art (Edison) studio, Ben Schwalb produced a sports reel for Columbia, and John T. Doran made a series of "historical shorts" for independent release. Paramount, back at its studio in Astoria, produced thirty-seven one-reelers.<sup>5</sup>

Although Paramount had pulled all the plugs when it stopped making features in Astoria in March 1932 (Grant Whytock, who edited *The Emperor Jones* there a year later, remembered having to reconnect all the electrical wiring), it still needed a supply of shorts to service its customers.<sup>6</sup> Some of these were made on the West Coast by Mack Sennett, but many were still being slapped together in New York. Fred Waller, who had been in charge of Paramount's "industrial division," seems to have continued producing "Paramount Pictorials" at the Paramount News facility at 544 West 43rd Street. A magazine reel not unlike the earlier "Paramount Pictographs," each Pictorial incorporated a bit of travelogue, some industrial film material, and an appearance by a musical personality, often a songwriter or composer like Johnny Green, Harold Arlen, or Herman Hupfeld.<sup>7</sup>

Eventually, the more ambitious "Paramount Headliners" musical series was revived on a modest schedule of one new reel every four to six weeks. At first, these films were also being made on West 43rd Street, but by 1934 production began to spill over to the West Coast Service Studios at 510-512 West 57th Street. This facility, an RCA licensee, had been opened by George W. Goman the year before.<sup>8</sup> Lynn Shores, who had worked for many of the eastern studios since the heyday of Fort Lee, was "executive producer," meaning that he directed most of the films made there.

Although they often appear physically cramped and constricted, the new Headliners series did have a professional polish missing from similar shorts produced at

Audio-Cinema. For example, an Alexander Woollcott vehicle, *Mr. W's Little Game* (1934, also featuring Leo G. Carroll), seems to take place entirely at a restaurant table; but for a chatty, intimate monologue like this, the size of the set is perfectly adequate. Another early Headliner, Duke Ellington with Ivie Anderson in *A Bundle of Blues* (1933), offers "Stormy Weather" in conventional "band short" fashion, with little in the way of settings or camera angles, apart from a few stock shots of rain clouds. But *Symphony in Black* (1935), which Fred Waller directed after the series returned to Astoria, is far more elaborate.<sup>9</sup> Not exactly a narrative, the film instead presents an impressionistic interpretation of the "tone poem of negro life" that Duke Ellington is seen composing. Staged in four brief movements, its "blues" episode—sung by Billie Holiday—is especially reminiscent of *Yamekraw* or the films of Dudley Murphy.<sup>10</sup>

The Paramount Headliners series soon became a showcase for the better local bands, including Isham Jones, Vincent Lopez, Phil Spitalny, and Red Nichols. *Cab Calloway's Hi-De-Ho* (1934) was another of Waller's more extravagant efforts, with Calloway literally "coming into your home" via radio. Johnny Green, Andre Kostelanetz, and even Ferde Grofé also appeared in the Headliners series, which continued to be produced in New York until the war.

After 1937 Fred Waller, whose primary interest had always been special effects photography, left to work on a multiple camera/projector system for the 1939 World's Fair. Vitarama, which yoked together eleven 16mm projectors for projection on a domed interior, had been commissioned for the Petroleum Industry Pavilion but was rejected at the last minute as "a little too radical for their purposes."<sup>11</sup> Waller and his backers (who by then included Laurence Rockefeller) began looking for another customer and in 1940 reconfigured the device as a training mechanism for anti-aircraft gunners. Four students were seated behind dummy 50-caliber machine guns and "fired" at the images of attacking planes projected all around them on a dome-shaped screen. The Waller Gunnery Trainer incorporated five 35mm projectors and, according to one visitor, resembled "the end of the Triboro Bridge" pushed inside a corner of the Perisphere (one of the architectural symbols of the World's Fair that had inspired it all).<sup>12</sup> Military experts seemed impressed and said they would be in touch.

Meanwhile, Waller's job as principal director of Paramount's short-film program had passed to Leslie Roush, once his assistant and later an editor on the Headliners series. But Roush lacked Waller's visual flair (or maybe his budget), and the musicals he directed reverted to the conventional "band short" look pioneered a decade earlier. *Artie Shaw's Class in Swing* and *Paramount Presents Hoagy Carmichael* (both made by Roush and cameraman George Webber in 1939) are straight concert films that depend on narration to provide dramatic shape.

In 1939 MGM relocated the production of its Robert Benchley comedy shorts to

New York. Four titles were shot in Astoria under the direction of Basil Wrangell before the studio finally dropped the series.<sup>13</sup> Benchley then signed with Paramount, which made nine more films in Astoria with Leslie Roush directing. Many of these parodies of conventional documentaries, done in Benchley's dry, self-deprecating fashion, seem genuinely tired, as if Benchley knew that he had exhausted this particular genre after five years at MGM. (At least one film, *The Witness*, does seem to point in a new direction, as Benchley fantasizes sarcastic responses to a congressional investigating committee.) Leonard Maltin, reviewing Benchley's screen career, finds that "the quality of these one-reelers plummeted after this move" from MGM and describes the later films with such terms as "unfunny," "standard," and "falls flat."<sup>14</sup> Although Maltin suggests that Roush deserves much of the blame, some of the trouble may have come from Benchley himself. Pete Mooney, then the assistant to Charles L. Glett (whose Audio Productions was now managing what was again being called Eastern Service Studios), remembered that one of his jobs was to find



Robert Benchley returned to New York in 1939 to continue the series of short comedies he had begun on the West Coast. Richard Allen, Norman Lloyd, and Marjorie Lord appeared with Benchley in *The Forgotten Man* (1941), one of the last films made by Paramount at the Astoria studio. Museum of the Moving Image.

Benchley whenever he failed to show up at the studio. "We phoned every hotel in New York, you know, finally found him and got him out of bed somewhere about noon time. . . . Les Roush was the director for Paramount, and Benchley'd come in and say, after we chased him one morning, 'Nothing like an early start, want you to know, let's get going.' This is about two o'clock and the guy is bombed out of his mind!"<sup>15</sup>

By this time, Waller had again returned to Astoria, now as a director of three-minute musical shorts called "Soundies." In 1940 the Mills Novelty Company, which serviced hundreds of jukeboxes across the country, had introduced the Panoram, a "motion picture juke box" that held a selection of these 16mm musical films. James Roosevelt formed Globe-Mills Productions to market the device, and Cinemasters began production of Soundies at the Fox Movietone studio on December 16, 1940. Arthur Leonard was the director, and Don Malkames the cameraman. Minoco Productions, Inc. replaced Cinemasters in the spring of 1941, and production moved to the Eastern Service Studios in Astoria.<sup>16</sup> By September 1941, Fred Waller had directed at least 108 of these short films, the prehistoric ancestor of the music video. A few others were directed by Bob Snody, then vice president of Audio Productions, and other Audio staff members.<sup>17</sup>

The talent pool available for Soundies was extremely down-market, especially when compared with the Paramount Headliners series. Fred Waller did direct "Fats" Waller in *Honeysuckle Rose* (1941), but he spent most of his time with the Kiddoodlers, Dave Schooler and His 21 Swinghearts, and the Alvino Rey Orchestra. The Delta Rhythm Boys and, inevitably, Cab Calloway also worked for Minoco, but the level of talent seems to have been higher on the West Coast, where Cyd Charisse (*Poeme*) and Doris Day (*My Lost Horizon*) occasionally appeared. It is difficult to criticize short musical films made in one day (or less), and today the peculiar, almost desperate energy apparent in many of them has attracted a cult following unique in the early musical field. As one supporter puts it, "Compensating somewhat for the almost audacious cheapness of Soundies is their lack of pretense," and the films certainly do lack any of that.<sup>18</sup>

"Early in 1941, while I was directing some three-minute movies for the Mills Juke Box people, I was suddenly called to the phone in the middle of a 'take,'" Fred Waller remembered. "It was Washington. The Navy wanted 31 trainers at once."<sup>19</sup> Waller and his associates eventually sold the government seventy-five Gunnery Trainers and spent the rest of the war mastering the techniques of filming with multiple synchronized cameras and projecting the results on curved screens. Thousands of GIs experienced Waller's multimedia spectacle, and more than a few came up to him to ask, "When are we going to see regular pictures like this?" When the war ended, Waller brought in new investors, reconfigured the apparatus as a three-camera system, and premiered Cinerama in 1952.



**"The Spice of the Program"**

Much of the slack that occurred when Paramount cut down its production of short films in Astoria in 1932 was taken up by the Educational Films Corporation of America. Despite the name, Educational was not a nontheatrical producer but a packager and producer of slapstick comedies (its logo showed a student's oil lamp, but under the peppy slogan "Educational Pictures: The Spice of the Program"). Educational had been distributing the films of second-tier comedy studios since the early 1920s, when founder Earle W. Hammons abandoned his original line of sponsored and industrial films.<sup>20</sup> By 1927, Educational had begun active production in Hollywood through its association with the Christie Film Company and its principal producer, comedy veteran Al Christie. The fact that Educational came to Astoria in 1933 was no accident. Moving the company into the Eastern Service Studios was a key element of John Otterson's plan for ERPI to squeeze RCA and its licensees out of the production business by making whatever inroads it could into the independent film market.<sup>21</sup>

According to a 1937 report by the U.S. Federal Communications Commission, "As early as 1930 ERPI was in control of Christie Film and Metropolitan [Sound Studios]," its West Coast production center.<sup>22</sup> Otterson and Hammons planned to turn Metropolitan into "a comprehensive producing and distributing organization in the non-theatrical sound motion picture field," and to do this they formed Educational Talking Pictures, Inc. on June 30, 1931. But this effort failed, and ERPI concentrated its nontheatrical interests in the East. In order to protect its investment, ERPI began to finance the theatrical product of Educational Pictures, Inc. through the Exhibitors Reliance Corporation on July 8, 1932, a pattern that would continue for the next five years.<sup>23</sup> So when the Christie Film Company went into bankruptcy in February 1933, ERPI knew it had found a tenant for its new Eastern Service Studios in New York.

On October 10, 1933, Educational began work on its first film in Astoria, Lillian Roth in *Million Dollar Melody*.<sup>24</sup> Al Christie was put in charge of the operation, which produced dozens of one- and two-reel comedies there over the next four years. "Mr. Christie's plan for the new comedies is to supply them with real stories and definite characterization. It is no longer enough, he realizes, to divert audiences completely by having a cross-eyed player act as bullseye for a fat man's pastry," reported one local daily.<sup>25</sup> A stable of comedians was put under contract, including Col. Stoopnagle and Budd, Ernest Truex, Bert Lahr, Tom Patricola, and Bob Hope; the blackface team of George Moran and Charles Mack was transferred from Educational's West Coast studio (which continued to operate at reduced capacity). "These shorts," Truex told a reporter, "will be as nearly like the old Sidney Drew comedies as possible, and will be more in the short feature class than the old-time slapsticks."<sup>26</sup>

Several of the first Astoria Educationals were directed by comedy veteran Jack White, who until he left in 1931 had been one of Educational's busiest producer-directors. White had been lured back by Educational's general manager, Jack Skirball, who had overall responsibility for production and distribution. Skirball was an ex-rabbi (White claims he was always referred to as "Rabbi Skirball") who had been an exhibitor in the Midwest before becoming interested in distribution.<sup>27</sup> In the fall of 1933 White directed four two-reelers in Astoria, including *Million Dollar Melody* and *Poppin' the Cork*, a raunchy pre-Code musical starring Milton Berle. Coming from Hollywood to New York, White discovered the same problems with studio facilities (and unionized studio workers) that had so irritated George Cukor two years earlier:

You should have seen the equipment they had. The camera was set on a series of rollers. When the cameraman sat, the camera would come up to where they wanted it; he counterweighted it. But when he got out, it would go lopsided. People who came to see me saw this and thought I was insane. Then the unions were after me for one thing or another. I finally said, "You've been promising things now for eleven years if people came to New York to shoot. Here I am. If you don't give me a square deal, you'll never get anyone from Hollywood here again, because I will see to it personally." That stopped them.<sup>28</sup>

White was out by the end of the year, but Al Christie stayed on, now directing most of the films himself. Scripts were written by Art Jarrett, Charles Williams, and Marcy Klauber; Astoria veteran George Webber was behind the camera. These films were distributed by 20th Century-Fox, which meant that they were seen widely in first-class theaters. Nevertheless, "Educational films almost always looked cheap," as Leonard Maltin puts it, "even though they were made in most cases by seasoned veterans. One problem was the claustrophobia of shooting at the company's Eastern studio in Astoria, Long Island."<sup>29</sup> In Educational's *Montague the Magnificent* (1937), Bert Lahr wins a fraudulent contest for which the prize is an appearance in a real movie. Instead, he winds up at the "Colossal Studios" on Long Island. "Aren't I going to Hollywood?" he snaps back, immediately aware of the implications of the location.

It is true that Educational's crews seldom left the stages, and the films appear even more studio-bound than Warner's Vitaphone shorts. The drawing-room ambience tended to reduce the amount of physical humor while emphasizing dialogue and situation comedy. A performer like Robert Benchley might have flourished here, but Educational's Astoria crew—producing six films a month—was working too fast to keep up any reasonable standard. Bob Hope carries *Going Spanish* (1934) single-handedly; *Dime a Dance* (1937) depends entirely on the chemistry between Imogene Coca and Danny Kaye (June Allyson and Barry Sullivan also appear in

bit parts). Occasional films, like *Kiss the Bride* (1935) with Buster West and Tom Patricola, do break away from this scripted patter and recall the anarchic energy of silent screen farce (Tom must impersonate Buster's new bride in order to placate a suspicious father-in-law). But few reached even this level.

Christie seemed to realize that the short-comedy genre was drying up under his feet and thought he knew what was responsible. "Words ruined the old comedy gags," he told the *New York Times*. "Slapstick was unreal. That's why it was slapstick and that's why it was funny. The minute you put words to it, the minute the slapstick comedians had to talk, they became sensible. You can't mix sense and slapstick. It isn't funny any more." In fact, the best material had been taken over by Mickey Mouse. "Don't let anyone tell you that Mickey's popularity is based on some elfin appeal," Christie concluded, "or because he represents any universal quality. Mickey and the cartoons are slapstick and that's why they're good."<sup>30</sup>

Was Christie thinking of these changes in terms of their impact on individual careers? If so, he didn't have to look very far for examples. Buster Keaton made sixteen films for Educational between 1934 and 1937. Most were shot on the West Coast, but Keaton made three in New York in 1936, while in town in connection with divorce proceedings. *Blue Blazes*, *The Chemist*, and *Mixed Magic* are no better and no worse than Keaton's West Coast Educationals, which is to say they bear little resemblance to the masterworks he had been producing only a few years earlier. But even if he had not been suffering the ravages of alcoholism and depression, Keaton would have had a hard time breathing life into a series of formulaic scripts that could have been written for any number of lesser vaudevillians.

To be fair, Christie did try to find some way of re-creating the "unreal" quality of silent comedy within the framework of "real stories and definite characterization." Oddball radio comedians like Col. Stoopnagle and Budd conjured surreal worlds of their own (Gilbert Seldes found them "by far the most distinguished of radio entertainers"), and the Borscht-belt antics of the Ritz Brothers (*Hotel Anchovy*, 1934), Pinky Lee (*Dental Folies*, 1937), Imogene Coca (*The Bashful Ballerina*, 1937), and Danny Kaye (*Cupid Takes a Holiday*, 1938) almost succeeded in substituting East Side *schtick* for Hollywood slapstick.<sup>31</sup> But, as happened with the earliest sound comedies, the cosmopolitan style of New York humor did not always play well around the country.

Censorship restrictions in place after 1933 made the situation even worse. Interviewed on the set of *The Bashful Ballerina*, Imogene Coca worried that her trademark "strip tease" routine, though acceptable in New York, might not get past the censors in Pennsylvania. Enveloped in "her big sou'wester," Coca prepared to give the impression of losing first a garter, then a stocking. But Christie was demanding multiple takes to protect the scene against any censorial eventuality. "But I don't take anything off at all," protested the large-eyed Miss Coca. . . . 'Can't

I pull out the coat and look down? That's the most important thing.”<sup>32</sup> The Production Code Administration vetted the scripts of short comedies as carefully as those of any feature. For *Dame Shy* (1935), problems arose just as Al Christie was about to direct Tom Patricola and Buster West in a comic brawl in a sailors' café. “They told us there was nothing in the code about sailors' fights,” Christie complained, “but they were afraid the Navy Department wouldn't like it! Not like a comic brawl in a comedy!” The film had to be rewritten on the spot, the fight scene eliminated.<sup>33</sup>

### A Race for the Bottom

Ultimately, neither censorship, nor lack of imagination, nor Mickey Mouse could be blamed for the problems of short-film operations like Educational. Industry economics were gradually forcing short comedies and musicals off the bill to make way for double features, and only the most cost-efficient short producers would survive.<sup>34</sup> By 1936 Hal Roach and Mack Sennett, Christie's old Hollywood rivals, had both abandoned the short-film business, and even Walt Disney understood the necessity of making the leap into features. In January 1938 Educational ceased production just as another corporate reorganization within AT&T returned Audio Productions to ESSI.<sup>35</sup>

Despite the collapse of Educational, Fox still provided a market for the occasional independently produced short. Don Malkames directed and photographed *Col. Stoopnagle's Cavalcade of Stuff* (1938), a bizarre series of blackouts in which “Col. Stoopnagle Reveals Camera Secrets” by describing the interior of Malkames's Akeley camera. The film then changes abruptly to a parody of “intrepid explorer” travelogues and ends with Stoopnagle on a roller coaster.<sup>36</sup>

If so much pressure was really bearing down on the short-film market, what could explain the dramatic *increase* in short-film production in New York through most of the 1930s? In fact, by producing in Queens and Brooklyn, both Paramount and Warner Bros. managed to shift the logistical and administrative overhead associated with these films away from their crowded Hollywood studios. Fox subcontracted the entire job to Educational. RKO, Columbia, and Universal also outsourced much of this work to independent producers who happened to find New York, with its surplus of talent and stage space, quite affordable. Many such producers, like Ben K. Blake, worked this line successfully for years, shifting from one studio facility to another as economic conditions dictated, avoiding long-term talent contracts and moving freely among the entire range of marginal film genres.

Blake had entered the business as an exhibitor in 1912 and over the years had been involved (generally through industrial divisions) with Universal, Pathé, Warner

Bros., and Columbia.<sup>37</sup> The Columbia shorts referred to earlier, which Blake's Rex Film Corporation made at the Biograph studio, were the "Court of Human Relations" and "Voice of Experience" series. These were "one-reel dramatizations of true-life confessions from [Blake's] private files of more than 5,000,000 letters," as one Rex trade advertisement put it.<sup>38</sup> According to Leonard Maltin, this "sob story series" was "economically filmed in New York and contained little of merit."<sup>39</sup> But if Maltin was dubious, historian William K. Everson later recommended at least one title, *From the Brink of Eternity* (1935), as plainly "bizarre" and "either a nostalgic treat or a disillusioning shock."<sup>40</sup>

Within a few years, Blake had shifted his operations to the West Coast Service Studios on 57th Street and was providing Columbia with short musicals. "Yesterday, when I went around to the studio," wrote one visitor to the set of *What's Cookin'*, "they were making pictures of a group of beautiful girls who were wearing costumes which showed their legs up to here, and a sister team who call themselves the 'Barry Sisters.' Until a little while ago the 'Barry Sisters' used to call themselves the Bagelman Sisters on the Yiddish Swing Hour on the radio."<sup>41</sup> This brief report is one of the last accounts of theatrical filmmaking in New York before Pearl Harbor, a dramatic dividing line that would bring one era of film production in New York to a screeching halt. Yet without losing a beat, Blake continued to flourish by simply returning to his industrial film business and producing another kind of short film for Borden's Farm Products, General Motors, and the National Urn Bag Company.<sup>42</sup>

In the case of RKO, the outsourcing of marginal production involved nearly every short-film genre imaginable. Although some RKO shorts were always made on the West Coast, in 1935–1936 New York was the source of most of its short-film releases, including both the Pathé newsreel and the *March of Time* news magazine. The Van Beuren Corporation provided RKO with cartoons like *The Sunshine Makers* and *Toonerville Trolley*, but Amadee J. Van Beuren was also producing several live-action series for RKO in New York: Goodman Ace and his wife, Jane, starred in the "Easy Aces" series, Bill Corum hosted the studio's sports reel, and Meyer Davis handled the Bert Lahr two-reelers. (Lahr's parody of Charles Laughton for this series, in *Henry the Ache* [1934], captures the outrageous dynamism of his Broadway persona better than anything he would make in Hollywood.) On rare occasions, making a short might even lead to a feature release. Van Beuren had been producing the "World on Parade" travelogues and "Struggle to Live" nature documentaries when Frank Buck approached him to finance a series of shorts recounting his jungle adventures. Buck returned with so much material that Van Beuren sold the films to RKO as features, including *Bring 'em Back Alive* (1932) and *Fang and Claw* (1935), films for which scoring, voicing, and editing were done at Van Beuren's facilities in New York.<sup>43</sup> RKO also distributed *Major Bowes' Theatre of the Air* (1935) and *Major*

*Bowes' Amateur Parade* (1936), which Biograph Pictures Corporation produced in the Bronx. John Auer directed, and Larry Williams was the photographer. One eager contestant was the young Frank Sinatra.<sup>44</sup>

Universal had commissioned shorts from William Rowland and Monte Brice earlier in the decade, but when these local producers switched to features in 1933, it created Mentone Productions to replace them.<sup>45</sup> At first Lynn Shores directed these short musicals (such as *Supper at Six*, a parody of *Dinner at Eight*, 1933) at his West Coast Service Studio on 57th Street.<sup>46</sup> By 1934, the Mentones were being made at the Fox Movietone studio by Milton Schwartzwald, a musical prodigy who had recently been working as general music director of RKO Theaters. Schwartzwald established a formula involving a nightclub or radio broadcast (or even television, in *Television Highlights* [1936], with Henny Youngman), which would allow for an easy mix of music and comedy. *Soup for Nuts*, a 1934 two-reeler starring Bob Hope, is typical: "Hope, master of ceremonies at a night club which has no patronage, persuades the proprietors to engage real talent, despite the wife's jealous fear of feminine competition. Vivienne Segal and various other radio names put on a show until the wife's jealous nature again gets the better of her and the club returns to its former state of somnolence."<sup>47</sup> Al Goodman and His Ensemble and the Saxon Sisters also appeared. The basic plot structure would just as easily fit *A Nite in a Nite Club* (1934, with Martha Raye and Buck and Bubbles), *Flippen's Frolics* (1936, with Jay C. Flippen), or any number of other Mentones.

Films like these have always been considered insignificant by any aesthetic standard and of minimal interest in terms of any studio's economic health. But at a time when Universal's feature-film production was limping along at the box office, the income generated by the Mentones was not insignificant. Universal spent \$98,000 for thirteen of these two-reelers during 1933–1934 and earned total world revenues of \$331,000; the following season the series cost \$97,000 and generated receipts of only \$272,000. Both sets of figures reflect a much better return on investment than the average Universal feature. This sort of nickel-and-dime business may not have attracted many headlines (or historians), but with the entire film industry shaken during the depression, any source of slow but steady profits could hardly be ignored. By 1935 Schwartzwald had moved the Mentones into the Biograph studio (where he shared space with Amadee Van Beuren and B. K. Blake), and he appears to have added a series of RKO musicals to his portfolio by 1938. But when production of Mentones stopped at the beginning of 1939, he moved to the West Coast to supervise production of musicals at Universal City.<sup>48</sup>

It is far easier to document production of the declining number of feature films made in New York in the late 1930s than to say anything definitive about the increasing number of short films and short-film producers. Because these independent operators seldom employed press agents and were constantly shifting allegiance



from one distributor or rental stage to another, they left few traces in the printed record. To make matters worse, many of the films they made survive as nothing more than a title printed on a release sheet. Some were never copyrighted; others were released under different names, or never released at all. Many local producers made no distinction between films they had made themselves and others they had merely latched on to. Jack Skirball's Skibo Productions, for example, offered a mixture of foreign films, local productions, and material licensed from a range of anonymous producers.<sup>49</sup> But even though there were many bottom feeders, the industry was still driven by a few well-capitalized sharks. Paramount and Educational certainly played their part. In the final analysis, however, the shorts business in the East continued to be powered by Warner Bros.

### Vitaphone Finale

With Murray Roth gone, Sam Sax operated the Brooklyn Vitaphone studio as a model motion picture factory. Production values were not to be enhanced by arty experimentation, because audiences were not patronizing short-film programs on the strength of glowing reviews. Instead, Sax provided solid entertainment, the best music and comedy available to New Yorkers in the 1930s. But for reasons of his own, he actively embraced the "film factory" metaphor that even then was associated with pedestrian and unimaginative product. "That's just what it is," he told one local reporter in 1935:

We work unlike any other studio in the country. We keep factory hours—9 to 5—and turn out a steady amount of movie footage, rain or shine, come what may. Our schedule calls for two shorts per week. And we haven't slipped up on this in the six years [*sic*] I've been running this place for the Warner Brothers. We start a picture Monday morning, finish it Wednesday evening. Then the carpenters (the only night workers) spend all Wednesday night building sets for the next short subject. And we're ready to start shooting the next one bright and early Thursday morning, finishing up Saturday evening, which gives the carpenters time to do the new sets. Everybody has a holiday Sunday—and we try to figure out so that the folks get legal holidays too—a most unusual thing in the movie business.<sup>50</sup>

Joseph Henabery, a director whom Sax had brought out from the West Coast, was clearly impressed by the tight ship his new boss was running. "When the director who had been shooting finished his picture," he recalled, "another director and all the departments of the studio were prepared to start the next."

Sometimes the switch came at noon. . . . When a company was shooting on one stage, scene striking and erection of new sets took place on the other. Most two reel pictures were shot in four days, and one reel pictures in one or two days. We stopped work at five o'clock each day. No matter if all the scripted scenes had or had not been shot . . . a discipline which forced everyone to concentrate.<sup>51</sup>

Sax was thinking about more than the bottom line. He took pains to publicize the matter-of-fact working conditions in Brooklyn as a way of countering Hollywood's negative image of New York as a center of featherbedding unionization. Jack White's experience at Astoria had not been unique. As far back as 1928, when Walt Disney was in New York to record the score of *Steamboat Willie*, he had written to his chief animator, Ub Iwerks, "Boy, the unions are sure tough on movie recording. They are doing all they can to discourage the 'Sound Film' craze."<sup>52</sup> Sax understood that if Hollywood wrote off New York entirely, his job would disappear along with the rest of the studio.

By 1938 the Brooklyn Vitaphone studio was producing 140 reels of shorts every year, about twenty-five hours of screen time. Generating this amount of footage was one thing; maintaining a reasonably high level of quality was something else. Despite his "all business" management style (or maybe because of it), Sax proved to be the most consistently successful producer of high-quality short films in the East. Sax estimated the permanent staff at 650, with another five thousand performers employed annually. It was the size of the local talent pool that justified the Brooklyn operation in the first place. "You can't get the talent on the Coast," Sax told *New York Times* film critic Bosley Crowther. "Well, where does that talent make headquarters? Right here in New York."<sup>53</sup> Unlike a West Coast studio, where nearly all the films would feature employees under long-term contract, Vitaphone was set up to take advantage of touring acts that might be available for only a few days or weeks. These acts would be packaged in an existing series, such as the "Melody Master" band shorts. These one-reel canned performances, reminiscent of the earliest sound shorts, were specifically designed for smaller theaters that offered no live stage acts. Performers would vary by availability: Clyde McCoy and Dave Apollon always seemed to be working, whereas Eddie Duchin and Glen Gray appeared only once or twice. And if no live acts were available, Sax would make films with marionettes—as when Salice's Puppets performed the "mad scene" from *Lucia di Lammermoor* in *Puppet Love* (1937).

Although band shorts dominated the era, individual headliners like Ruth Etting, Hal Le Roy, and Lillian Roth also made frequent appearances, often in the more complex "Broadway Brevities," two-reel subjects whose greater length allowed for more conventional musical comedy narratives. At times, the Brevities would offer



Warner Bros. continued to make films in New York because the best available talent was “right here.” Bob Hope (seen with Nell O’Day in *Watch the Birdie*, 1935) starred in six shorts for Vitaphone and also worked locally for Universal and Educational before making his first features in Hollywood. Courtesy of Ron Hutchinson.

tabloid versions of Broadway musicals already owned by Warners. Cole Porter’s *50 Million Frenchmen* had been made on the West Coast in 1931 as a vehicle for Ole Olsen and Chic Johnson, but with all the songs eliminated. In 1934 Sax compressed the story to two reels (not so difficult) and cast Dorothy Stone and Bob Hope in *Paree, Paree*. The sound track was a string of Porter classics—“You’ve Got That Thing,” “You Do Something to Me,” “Find Me a Primitive Man”—performed by singers and dancers who had never worked in Hollywood and were operating entirely within the Broadway musical tradition.<sup>54</sup>

Sax also appears to have had a weakness for Continental exotics and built quite a few films around Olga Baclanova, Fifi D’Orsay, and Irene Bordoni. All these women had worked in Hollywood, but their real careers were in the theater (and for some in the 1930s, radio). They apparently enjoyed a few days’ work on films like *The Singing Silhouette* (Baclanova, 1935) or *Du Barry Did All Right* (Bordoni, 1937), which allowed them to continue their performing careers in New York while lending a

veneer of respectability to the operation in Flatbush.<sup>55</sup> The same probably cannot be said for the Duncan Sisters, who reprised their blackface “Topsy and Eva” routine in *Surprise* (1935). But the opportunity to see and hear Molly Picon (*A Little Girl with Big Ideas*, 1934) or Lee Wiley (in *Woody Herman and His Orchestra*, 1938) continued to give the audiences in “small towns where the big name bands are seldom heard except over the air” some notion of the range of musical entertainment currently available in the big city.<sup>56</sup>

On the other hand, if an act was not strong enough to carry even a single reel, Sax was perfectly willing to string it together with several others and market the result as a “vaudeville compilation.” Some of these productions simply offered one forgotten act after another; others were loosely organized around radio or night-club themes. Sigmund Spaeth, the radio “tune detective” who worked for many of the local studios, provided another useful framework. Continuity was not an issue, as a description of *Vitaphone Hippodrome* (1936) indicates: “First on the bill, Kluting’s Entertainers, an animal act using dogs and an angora rabbit for a number of novel tricks. Second, Johnny Lee and the Three Sees in a comedy piano routine and Russian dancing. Next, Molly Picon sings an original number describing New York’s East Side. Last, the Michon Brothers do an unusual comedy acrobatic act.”<sup>57</sup>

Similar vaudeville collages had been discarded by MGM and other major producers years earlier, but Warners continued to market them successfully throughout the decade. Of course, such revues were still rigorously segregated, with black and white acts offered on separate bills. The Nicholas Brothers appeared with Adelaide Hall in *All Colored Vaudeville Show* (1935) and with Nina Mae McKinney in *The Black Network* (1936); none of these performers would have been spliced into the same reel with Molly Picon or Kluting’s Entertainers. Nevertheless, Sax took full advantage of headliners like Don Redman, Cab Calloway, Noble Sissle, and Claude Hopkins. With the glow of the Harlem Renaissance receding, there were no more African American tone poems, but neither was there anything like Paramount’s Louis Armstrong series. In *Barber Shop Blues* (1933), for example, a shop owner wins the lottery and decides to upgrade the local hangout rather than retire in luxury. A dissolve transforms the shop into an art deco palace, with the Claude Hopkins Orchestra providing background music. The lyrics of “St. Louis Blues” are recast as barbershop patter (“I want a shave/and a haircut too”), the Four Step Brothers dance to “Nagasaki,” and Orlando Roberson sings an operatic arrangement of Joyce Kilmer’s “Trees.”

Although Vitaphone emphasized its musicals, the studio produced comedies as well, generally under the “Big V Comedies” label. Roscoe “Fatty” Arbuckle returned to the screen in six two-reelers made in Flatbush in 1932 and 1933, extremely physical comedies that reused many of his great silent film routines. Reaction to

his comeback was said to have been positive, but Arbuckle died before he could take advantage of it. Instead, Shemp Howard, who appeared in two of the Arbuckle films, was promoted to a series of his own.<sup>58</sup> Shemp never had the same success as a single act that he did when appearing with his brother Moe as one of the Three Stooges, but Sax was always willing to try, and his batting average was fairly good. Jack Haley, Harry Gribbon, and Bob Hope (six films) each had series of their own. Comedians like Phil Silvers (*The Candid Kid*, 1938) and Red Skelton (*Broadway Buckaroo*, 1939) were used more sparingly. It was still hard to predict which elements of New York humor might actually travel. Edgar Bergen, who would soon become a major radio celebrity, appeared in half a dozen short comedies for Vitaphone. "The pictures were duly made, released and turned out miserable flops," Bosley Crowther reported. "It is only since Bergen has become a person of national renown that the shorts have been resurrected and redistributed. Now they are cleaning up."<sup>59</sup>

Thousands of performers may have trooped through the Vitagraph studio, but Sax needed only a handful of directors to stage-manage this operation. Roy Mack



Roscoe "Fatty" Arbuckle made his belated comeback in a series of Vitaphone comedies shot in Brooklyn in 1932 and 1933. Coney Island Avenue was a favorite nearby location.



had been working in Flatbush since 1930. He was soon joined by Joseph Henabery and, in 1934, by Lloyd French. This trio appears to have handled whatever was in production on any given week, although Henabery suggests that he was responsible for the more dramatic subjects. He directed most of the S. S. Van Dine mystery series and the Floyd Gibbons “Your True Adventure” films. Gibbons, a celebrity newscaster and Hearst columnist, would introduce some hair-raising news story, usually involving a near-fatal accident or miscarriage of justice. In *The Human Bomb* (1938), for example, a man walks into a bank wearing an explosive vest and must be talked out of detonating it. Gibbons was the “dashing adventurer” type and wore a prominent black eye patch, which made it difficult for him to read the narration written on his cue cards. Henabery solved the problem by printing Gibbons’s lines on a continuous roll of cellophane, which he scrolled up between two drums placed near the camera—the forerunner of the modern teleprompter.<sup>60</sup>

Lloyd French had worked for the Hal Roach studio since the early 1920s and directed many of the later Laurel and Hardy shorts, including *Busy Bodies* (1933). Sax assigned him to the “Joe Palooka” series (1936–1937), but he also directed everything from *Dizzy and Daffy* (1935), a baseball comedy starring Dizzy and Paul Dean, Shemp Howard, and Roscoe Ates, to *The All Girl Revue* (1939), a charming June Allyson musical with songs by Sammy Cahn and Saul Chaplin.<sup>61</sup>

Roy Mack appears to have been the busiest of all, directing everything from *Paree, Paree* to *Home Run on the Keys* (1937), in which slugger “Babe” Ruth and composer Zez Confrey compare their greatest hits (Ruth picks his “called home run” in the 1934 World Series). Mack’s *Seasoned Greetings* (1933), a vehicle for Charlie Chaplin’s ex-wife, Lita Grey Chaplin, was stolen by seven-year-old Sammy Davis Jr., another Vitaphone favorite.<sup>62</sup> Mack’s masterpiece was probably *20,000 Cheers for the Chain Gang* (1933), a nightmarish spoof of *I Am a Fugitive* and *20,000 Years in Sing Sing*, staged as if it were *Footlight Parade*. An enlightened warden brings in a chorus line of burlesque dancers to entertain the prisoners. Everyone sings the “Sing Sing Serenade,” and the escaped fugitives try their best to break back in.

In 1936 Sax announced the opening of a 26,000-square-foot studio building, complete with an enormous water tank for aquatic sequences and the most modern lighting and electrical equipment, just across the street from the original lot. “Warner Brothers point with pride to this building which is supposed to be more advanced in design than are either the Hollywood studios or those which they control in Teddington, England,” one reporter noted.<sup>63</sup> But despite this considerable investment in New York real estate, Warners had already begun filming shorts in Technicolor on the West Coast. Those films could make use of the studio’s contract talent—stars and directors—and production values were upgraded accordingly, even for the black-and-white product. Such resources could not be justified in Brooklyn.



Early in 1939 Roy Mack directed a one-reel musical, *Ozzie Nelson and His Orchestra*, in conventional band short fashion, with the genial Ozzie waving his baton and smiling at the audience. A year later Warners released another film with the same title, which they had produced in California. (Distribution catalogs described them as *Ozzie Nelson #1* and *Ozzie Nelson #2*.) *Ozzie Nelson #2* was directed by Jean Negulesco, soon to become a director of important features like *Humoresque* (1946), and photographed by Bert Glennon, who had recently completed *Stagecoach* and *Drums Along the Mohawk*. There are more sets, more camera positions, more interesting lighting effects, and a better developed narrative line. It even features Harriet Hilliard opposite Ozzie.

As it turned out, *Ozzie Nelson #1* was one of the last films Warners ever made in Brooklyn. In March 1939, the company announced that all short-film production would be shifted to Burbank by April 15. Sax had spoken too soon a few months earlier when he told Bosley Crowther that all the best talent was to be found in New York. NBC Radio City had opened at Sunset and Vine in 1938 (on the site of the original Jesse Lasky studio), the same year that CBS built its own West Coast production center only two blocks away. Now celebrities like Jack Benny and Edgar Bergen could easily juggle careers in both radio and film without ever leaving Los Angeles.<sup>64</sup> Sax was put on a boat to England, where he briefly took charge of Warners' British operations at the Teddington studio. Within a few months he was back in Hollywood promoting Phonovision, another musical jukebox system.<sup>65</sup> He would produce only one more film, *Why Girls Leave Home*, in 1945.

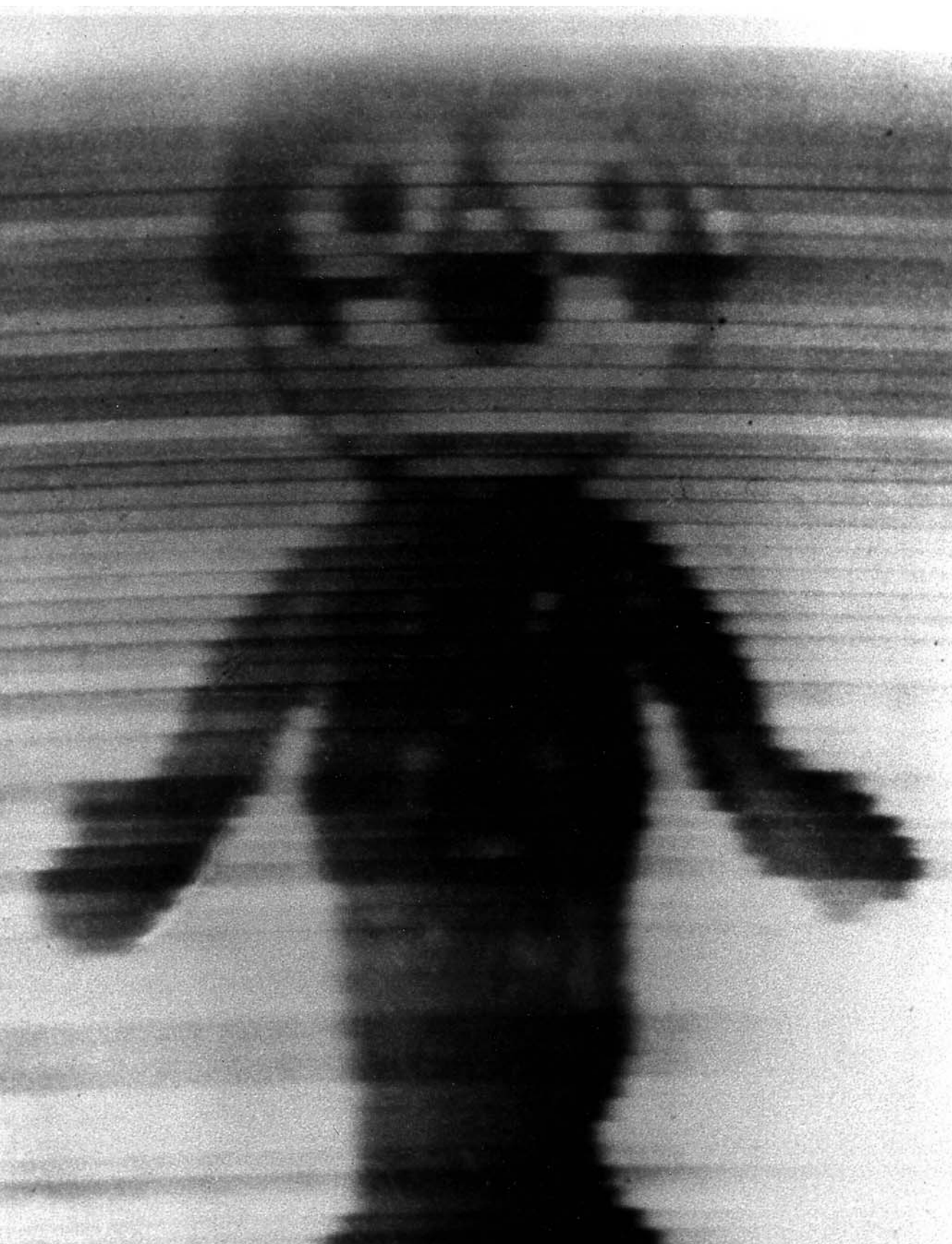
The Brooklyn Vitaphone staff gave Sam Sax a proper send-off in 1939 as he prepared to leave for Warners' Teddington studio in England. His departure marked the end of traditional major-studio production in New York. Front row, Joseph Henabery and Lloyd French, far left; Roy Mack smiling at Sam Sax, center. Courtesy of Ron Hutchinson.



Of course, the distribution system required more than one kind of theatrical short. As early as 1937 *Film Daily* had cited “sports thrillers” and travelogues for their “consistent audience appeal” in the shorts market.<sup>66</sup> RKO and Paramount still produced their sports reels in New York, with Bill Corum or Ted Husing narrating a traditional highlight reel. But Warners had already shifted production of its sports reel to the West Coast, where it was handled more like a Technicolor magazine feature. In any case, neither sports reels nor travelogues needed stage space in Flatbush. Joe Henabery blamed double features and the end of block booking for the closing of the studio, but Al Christie was probably closer to the mark: Mickey Mouse was responsible—or in this case, Daffy Duck.<sup>67</sup>

In 1934 Warners had released twenty black-and-white cartoons; in 1939 it released forty-four cartoons, most of them in Technicolor.<sup>68</sup> The studio would release sixty-eight one-reel short subjects in 1943, but thirteen of these were sports reels and thirty-nine were cartoons. Only ten band shorts and six “Vitaphone Varieties” were on the schedule, and Warners didn’t need to operate a separate studio in Brooklyn for that amount of product. Lloyd French and Roy Mack both tried unsuccessfully to continue their careers in Hollywood. Joseph Henabery stayed in New York, working in the sponsored film industry and directing many training films for the Signal Corps at what had once been Paramount’s Astoria studio. Warner Bros. may have shut down production in the East, but it maintained a presence in Flatbush for many years, using part of the lot as a storage facility (most of the property was later acquired by the Yeshiva University High School). And Sam Sax’s great new soundstage played its own role in the postwar revival of New York film and video production: acquired by NBC during the “golden age” of live television in the early 1950s, its future tenants included *The Cosby Show*, *As the World Turns*, and Mary Martin’s landmark colorcast of *Peter Pan*.

An image of Felix the Cat, broadcast by NBC, as seen on a 60-line mechanical television receiver in 1930.



# 13

## Radio Visions

### The Spinning Wheel

Even though most histories of broadcasting discuss New York's central role in the postwar development of American television, it is important to understand that various broadcasters, manufacturers, and lone inventors had been refining the technology (and programming) of television there since 1927. Television, even in America, was not first demonstrated in New York, but the city quickly became the center of the nation's sudden fascination with "distant electric vision." In May 1931 *Radio News* listed eleven "currently active" television stations in the United States, four of which were located in and around New York.<sup>1</sup> When Mayor Jimmy Walker formally opened the CBS station in July, the total rose to five. Announcer Ted Hus- ing introduced the mayor, along with "Columbia television girl" Natalie Towers. Two engineers spoke on "What to Expect of Television," one of them from the Reichs-Rundfunk-Gesellschaft in Berlin. Kate Smith and the Boswell Sisters sang, and George Gershwin played "Liza." Although the inaugural telecast lasted only forty-five minutes, W2XAB, as the new station was called, promised to be on the air from 8:00 to 11:00 every night.<sup>2</sup>

Ed Sullivan might have been proud of this lineup thirty years later, but media historians are generally uninterested. W2XAB's broadcasts, like those of the other local stations on the air that year, are considered little more than prehistoric scribbles, irrelevant to the commercial television boom of the late 1940s and 1950s. Television receivers of this era, now said to be as rare as Stradivarius violins, sit silently in a handful of moving image museums. No one remembers the programs, historians of technology are the only ones concerned with the engineering, and



even the economic issues that drove these broadcasts are generally misunderstood. Nonetheless, as Joseph Udelson notes in his pioneering history of prewar American television, “The kind of television system that exists today in America can be fully understood only after these complexities of its history are disentangled and dispassionately examined.”<sup>3</sup>

Since the nineteenth century, inventors and engineers had been dreaming of devices that would allow vision beyond the horizon, but only in the 1920s was anyone able to demonstrate practical results. Solving the mechanical problems proved to be the easy part: to what useful end could this new toy be put, even if it was made to work properly? From today’s perspective, the development of television is often understood as an effort to perfect “radio with pictures,” but that was only one of several potential uses suggested by the early inventors, and not necessarily the most obvious one. In the United States, demonstrations of television’s potential for facsimile transmission had already been given by C. Francis Jenkins in Washington, and Westinghouse (in East Pittsburgh) and General Electric (in Schenectady) were also known to be working on the problem.

On April 7, 1927, AT&T’s Bell Telephone Laboratories unveiled its own system in a dramatic demonstration linking speakers in New York and Washington, DC. Two devices were shown: a picture telephone (which functioned only one way, Washington to New York), and a large-screen machine with a two-by-three-foot image, a “visual loudspeaker” intended as an adjunct to Bell Lab’s newly invented public address system. AT&T vice president John J. Carty in Washington chatted with his boss, Walter S. Gifford, in New York. Secretary of Commerce Herbert Hoover then came on the line and reminded audiences in both cities that “the world is under obligation to the American Telephone and Telegraph Company” for its development of the system. The broadcasting of entertainment programs was not supposed to be on AT&T’s agenda, although the added participation of several vaudevillians, including a blackface act, suggested that “the commercial future of television” lay to some degree in “public entertainment,” especially instantaneous newsreels, dramas, and musical performances.<sup>4</sup>

The large-screen television did not work well, but the picture phone was judged a success, and AT&T maintained rudimentary picture phone service between New York and Washington until at least 1932. The scope of this demonstration, which required three separate transmission channels and the work of one thousand employees, was so far beyond the resources of the company’s rivals that it set a technical standard that would not be equaled for years, effectively convincing the public that it was telephone service that would most likely benefit from the new technology. Indeed, just one month earlier Paramount had released Fritz Lang’s science fiction classic *Metropolis*, a vision of the future in which television appears only in the form of the picture phone—a coincidence that the *New York Times* described as “a case of a prophecy being fulfilled about as soon as it started.”<sup>5</sup>

On the other hand, if the future of television did lie in “public entertainment,” there was a strong difference of opinion on just how this public might be served. As radio broadcasting became more prominent in the late 1920s, one faction regarded television as an “attachment” to be appended to existing receivers, not much more complicated than the recently introduced loudspeaker. But the AT&T demonstration suggested that quality television reception could be obtained only with industrial-grade apparatus, a conclusion that began to seem even more likely after the first primitive home receivers came on the market. In that case, television might first be commercialized as a theatrical entertainment, but “theater television” seemed like another expensive technological innovation to be paid for by those national chains that had only recently been wired for talking pictures.

Television first became “a major attraction” at the annual Madison Square Garden Radio Show in September 1928, when forty thousand visitors marveled at the displays of three different manufacturers.<sup>6</sup> The pictures visible on these simple receivers were only an inch or two high. But three years later, the highlight of the show was Ulisses Sanabria’s projection of ten-foot-high video images, clearly intended for theatrical use. A speech from the police commissioner, a boxing match, an appearance by Eddie Cantor, and a demonstration by animator Max Fleischer drawing his own cartoons were all on the schedule, although it is unclear who may actually have appeared.<sup>7</sup>

Sanabria then gave fifty-six performances of projected television at the Broadway Theatre, a demonstration discussed at length in film industry trade journals like *Motion Picture Projectionist*, whose readers expected that television would probably emerge as an attachment to *their* technology.<sup>8</sup> Sanabria’s screen was hung in the center of the stage, directly above an enclosed “broadcasting booth” into which guests like Vincent Lopez would disappear while being televised. “John Tio offered his talking parrot in a very short and undistinguished bit,” carped *Variety*, whose critic was clearly surprised when audiences applauded the demonstration. The content of the television performance changed from day to day, depending on the talent available; audience members were encouraged to enter the broadcasting booth so their friends could see them on screen.<sup>9</sup> Another attraction was a scene from the Theatre Guild’s current hit, *The House of Connelly*, with future Group Theater members Franchot Tone and Margaret Barker (in fact, the Group subsequently cited *The House of Connelly* as its first official production). “For the most part, the images were clear enough to afford recognition of a well-known face,” the *Times* reported, and Sanabria was said to have hired William Morris “to supervise the presentation of television units in theaters.”<sup>10</sup> Two years later Sanabria would return to New York with an improved projection system, this time employing a lamp said to be “100 times as brilliant” as the one used in 1931.<sup>11</sup>

During the prewar period there were any number of reasons to believe that theater television would be the most efficient way to market this new technology. That



dream faded when consumers finally began buying home receivers in quantity in the late 1940s, and projected television never seemed to fulfill its early promise. But nearly all the inventors and manufacturers in Europe and America involved themselves with theater television to one degree or another, because no one in the prewar period could predict to what extent the television audience would ultimately be captured by either the great theater chains or the growing broadcast networks—or perhaps a combination of both. During his 1933 demonstration Sanabria even suggested that if television in the home might eventually put the “‘main street’ motion picture theater” out of business, Hollywood would still be in control, operating “over radio waves instead of through the turnstile.”<sup>12</sup>

Sanabria’s New York demonstrations were all by wire, not wireless. Although most television today travels at least to some degree by wire, historians of broadcasting have always regarded wireless demonstrations in this era as somehow more representative of “pure” television. But by contrast with AT&T’s 1927 demonstration, the “first regular broadcasting of images by television over the radio from New York,” accomplished by WRNY on August 14, 1928, produced only meager results.<sup>13</sup> The station was operated by Hugo Gernsback, better known today as the publisher of *Amazing Stories* and the father of American science fiction, but then also involved with a series of broadcasting and electronics journals. Because he had only one broadcast channel available, Gernsback could transmit either image or sound, but not both simultaneously. “After a singer or other entertainer has finished, his or her face will be sent out over the air by television.”<sup>14</sup> Experimenters with television receivers were instructed to throw a switch changing the output from sound to picture and back again, literally negotiating a passage between silent movies and radio. On August 21 Gernsback broadcast television signals from his transmitter in Fort Lee, New Jersey (atop the old Villa Richard in the Coytesville district) to Philosophy Hall at New York University. Five hundred invited guests assembled to see the face of Mrs. John Geloso, wife of the engineer who had installed the apparatus for the Pilot Electrical Company. “Mrs. Geloso closed her eyes, opened and closed her mouth and moved from side to side. The images were about one and one-half inches square, but were magnified by a lens to twice that size.”<sup>15</sup>

Just a few years earlier radio broadcasting itself had first been promoted by receiver manufacturers and the retailers who hoped to market their sets. Sponsored programming came later. Pilot Radio’s cooperation with WRNY was intended to replicate this success and put Pilot on the ground floor of television retailing. Another manufacturer, Daven Laboratories, also had sets on the market and did what it could to promote their sales.<sup>16</sup> On August 21 (the same day as Gernsback’s demonstration) Bamberger and Company in Newark, which was selling Daven’s television receivers, demonstrated a “synchronized” image and sound television program, a two-minute puppet show called “Creative Genius.” The sound was broadcast over

station WOR while the image was sent by wire from a studio inside the store. Major Herbert W. Dawley, a producer of cartoon and puppet films, supervised the puppetry crew. A curtain rose, and a puppet symbolizing "Creative Genius" was seen assembling a piece of delicate apparatus, out of which appeared a winged spirit holding a globe, "The Spirit of Television." Viewers listened to the accompanying narration and musical score through headphones. Claimed to be the first "synchronized" image-and-sound drama presented by television, the offering was certainly the first to feature a specially written text.<sup>17</sup>

In 1928 the term "synchronized" was commonly used to refer to talking pictures, themselves understood as a marriage of movies and radio. Indeed, observers commenting on the first public television demonstrations frequently described the new technology by referring to the development of its presumed ancestor. An account of a 1932 CBS telecast reported that "[o]nlookers were reminded of the earliest motion pictures," and Ulisses Sanabria felt that 1933 television "is much like the movie show of 1906."<sup>18</sup> The broad performance of vaudevillian A. Dalton, a feature of AT&T's initial 1927 demonstration, reminded the *New York Times* of *Fred Ott's Sneeze*, "the first piece of comedy ever recorded in motion pictures."<sup>19</sup> And reporting on a 1931 demonstration, R. E. Charles again invoked not only the technology, but also the subject matter of the early "flickers": "Finally I reached one of the cabinets and got my face down close to the lens. A girl was dancing. Her moving image was less than three inches square, the lines were somewhat blurred and the details a bit muddy. There was a decided flicker, like the flicker in the old mutoscopes of thirty years ago."<sup>20</sup>

Because history is usually written by the victors, the development of television is traditionally regarded as a project of the broadcasting industry. But in the 1920s and 1930s, nearly every advance in American television displayed some significant connection with the motion picture business. Recollections of a miniature dancing girl performing in an electrical cabinet are only the tip of an iceberg. Seventy-five years ago, what are today referred to as "moving image media" already shared significant aspects of the same technology, programming, financing, and even key administrative personnel. And as with the early cinema, much of the history of early American television also took place within commuting distance of Times Square.

Until 1932, all television demonstrations involved various systems of mechanical scanning, usually based on Nipkow disc technology patented in 1884. This system required a rapidly spinning disc, pierced at the perimeter with a spiral of forty-eight (or twenty-four or sixty) pin holes, a lens to gather and focus reflected light, and a small aperture about an inch square placed against this spiral to frame the image. Each revolution of the disc would scan one complete frame (the horizontal definition being equal to the number of holes in the disc). In the "camera" a photocell

placed behind the aperture would have registered the variations in light created by the scanning process and modulated an electric current accordingly, transforming a two-dimensional image into a one-dimensional string of image information. This analog signal could be sent out by wire or wireless to the receiver, where a flickering lamp responded to the variations in signal intensity and reconstructed the original image via another spinning Nipkow disc. If enough images could be transmitted every second, as in the cinema, the viewer would see a recognizable moving picture.

This scanning process required extremely high light levels owing to its inefficient utilization of reflected light. An improved “direct scanning” system placed the arc lamp of a standard movie projector behind the aperture in the “camera,” illuminating the subject with a “flying spot” of projected light that was reflected back into a larger array of photocells (a technique that had its own problems, because it required near darkness on the set). More elaborate systems involved mirrored drums or corkscrews, some of which could also be used for projection.<sup>21</sup> The sensitivity of the photocell was critical, and Theodore Case’s Thalofide, which had been crucial to both the Phonofilm and the Movietone talking picture processes, again proved invaluable.

Today it is clear that these “mechanical television” systems had crucial technical limitations and could never compete with “electronic television” and its greater potential resolution and lack of moving parts. Rather than the motion pictures of 1895, this early television technology is more suggestive of sophisticated pre-cinema devices like Émile Reynaud’s *théâtre optique* or the electrical tachyscope of Ottomar Anschutz. As one viewer said in 1930, “It reminds me of the penny ‘movies’ we used to buy when kids. Remember them? A thick pad of pictures which you held in one hand while you flipped the leaves with the thumb of the other.”<sup>22</sup> To modern eyes mechanical television images might suggest an obstetrician’s sonogram, where a head or an arm can be recognized if one is looking for them.<sup>23</sup> On the other hand, the frame rate was considerably better than the ten frames per second of the earliest cell phones. But mechanical television technology was already obsolete by the time the public first saw it, something that many writers at the time suspected and a handful of inventors knew for certain. As early as 1927, for example, Hugo Gernsback had predicted that “in time the rotating disc will be done away with entirely,” although he had no clear idea of what might replace it.<sup>24</sup> Of course, the fact that the technology proved a dead end is no reason to disregard related developments in programming and industrial organization. That a mechanical television bubble existed at all over the next five years can be attributed to the operations of three very different corporations—NBC, CBS, and Jenkins Television—each with its own understanding of the new medium and its proper relationship to both “blind broadcasting” and the motion picture industry.<sup>25</sup>

### Jenkins Television Corporation

The most aggressive proponent of mechanical television in the United States was C. Francis Jenkins, holder of more than four hundred patents (eighty-five of them for television) and the last of the great lone-wolf inventors.<sup>26</sup> With his partner, Thomas Armat, Jenkins had perfected the first modern motion picture projector, the Phantoscope, in 1895 (the device was soon purchased by Thomas Edison and marketed as his own). Working in his own laboratory near Washington, Jenkins continued to dabble in motion pictures, broadcasting, aviation, and any other field that struck his fancy. He became interested in the transmission of photographs by electricity and achieved some success with this by 1922, although his first facsimile images took up to three minutes to transmit.<sup>27</sup>

Because of his work on the motion picture projector, Jenkins understood that if the rate of transmission could be increased to twelve or sixteen images per second, he would be able to send out moving pictures instead of still photographs and maps.<sup>28</sup> Despite formidable engineering obstacles, Jenkins quickly solved the basic problem and gave the first witnessed demonstration of televised moving images by the end of 1923.<sup>29</sup> Reporters testified that they saw him wave his hand in front of the apparatus and place small items before the transmitter, all of which were crudely visible on the receiver. But Jenkins had few resources to devote to this gadget, and it was not until 1925 that he gave a heavily promoted public demonstration for the Navy Department, transmitting the silhouette of an operating windmill. At this point he may have regarded the moving image demonstrations mainly as publicity for his real project, the merchandising of a wireless fax machine that would allow weather maps to be transmitted instantaneously to ships at sea. Three years later, on July 2, 1928, Jenkins began broadcasting "public entertainment" from Washington on station W3XK. Once the only television experimenter in the country, he now saw that he faced considerable competition from industrial giants like Westinghouse and General Electric, not to mention a host of privately financed rivals in both the United States and Europe.

As a professional inventor and inveterate self-promoter, Jenkins understood the power that could result simply from naming things, and he developed an elaborate taxonomy to describe exactly what he was doing. Irked that AT&T seemed to have usurped the word "television" with its picture phone demonstration, he suggested that this term be reserved only for the transmission of "living images" over *wire* (as in "telephone"). "Radiovision" was his preferred term for the wireless broadcast of live images, and the broadcast of filmed images he called "Radiomovies."<sup>30</sup> Whereas other television pioneers, such as Philo T. Farnsworth, were fascinated by television's ability to immediately transmit everyday events, Jenkins, with his motion picture background, was less interested in live broadcasting than in the

practical advantages of prerecorded programming. He recognized that presidential inaugurations, sports, and what he called “unusual news, like the tumbling down of the Capitol building, the collapse of the Brooklyn bridge, or the dynamiting of Faneuil Hall,” were best covered live.<sup>31</sup> But like a modern programmer, he assumed everything else should be on tape—or, in his case, film. Jenkins and his staff argued that in the absence of an interconnected network, Radiomovies would allow for efficient syndication of programming. A station could not depend on celebrities to show up for live Radiovision broadcasts at inconvenient hours, so their appearances needed to be recorded in advance. He believed that licensing existing films would be less costly than producing original material and seemed to be in love with the idea of reruns.<sup>32</sup> Eventually the airwaves would be flooded with filmed entertainment provided by the motion picture industry.

Jenkins had the public’s attention, and he had the technology—or, at any rate, *a* technology. What he lacked was financing, at least until the formation of the Jenkins Television Corporation in December 1928. The president of Jenkins Television was James W. Garside, who also served as president of the De Forest Radio Corporation. Jenkins would be the front man, “vice president in charge of research.” The new corporation intended to make its money primarily by selling Jenkins television transmitters, receivers, and related apparatus, running the fax business, collecting



The front cover of an advertising brochure promoting Jenkins Radiovision receivers in 1930. Purchasers are promised an experience closer to theater than to radio.

royalties from licensees, and “broadcasting . . . visual entertainment, information and instruction.”<sup>33</sup>

At first it was reported that Jenkins Television was negotiating with a large theater chain “to broadcast movies by radio television directly to the screens of the motion picture houses.”<sup>34</sup> The *New York Daily Mirror* had Jenkins “dickering with Madison Square Garden . . . for exclusive rights to television broadcast sporting events there,” apparently as a form of theater television.<sup>35</sup> But Jenkins ultimately ignored such large-screen venues and put all his energy into home receivers. In January 1929 it was announced that he would build a station in New Jersey as soon as he could convince the Federal Radio Commission that the string-and-bailing wire operation he proposed was worth the bandwidth.<sup>36</sup> His first demonstration to the commission that month was not encouraging. (“The televised subjects included two dancing girls, a negro chasing a chicken, and a collection of pen and ink sketches.”)<sup>37</sup> At a crucial set of hearings in Washington in February, RCA and Westinghouse sent experts to testify that acceptable television images could not be transmitted on the narrow bandwidth Jenkins proposed and argued that nothing should be authorized until the technology proved itself in the laboratory.<sup>38</sup>

Jenkins offered a classic lone inventor versus giant corporation defense: he would take the risk of going on the air with an imperfect system so that improvements might be generated from the bottom, from the thousands of radio amateurs who, he claimed, had collectively been responsible for much of the improvement in early blind broadcasting.<sup>39</sup> To this end he had been flooding the market with television kits at a time when little or nothing was on the air; by March 1929 he claimed to have sold “several thousand” of them for \$2.50 each, less than the price of manufacture (tubes were extra).<sup>40</sup> An unsigned article in the *New York Sun*, obviously planted by Jenkins interests, went so far as to claim that “it is on the experimenters that this art must rise or fall. Just as experimenters developed sound broadcasting so that it might become a commonplace institution and a vast industry, so television now beckons to the experimenters of the world for a similar interest and ardent support.”<sup>41</sup> This argument carried the day, and within a few months Jenkins was broadcasting “motion picture films in the form of television” from a new station, W2XCR, located at 346 Claremont Avenue in Jersey City. His pictures consisted of 48-line images refreshed fifteen times a second.<sup>42</sup>

In Washington, Jenkins had filled his “schedule” with a constantly repeated series of silhouette films (the restricted bandwidth precluded transmitting anything of greater definition). These subjects resembled the motion pictures he had made in the 1890s, when he was developing the Phantoscope: a woman dancing or a little girl bouncing a ball. The first Radiomovies were filmed in his Washington laboratory by one of his assistants, Florence Anthony Clark. In 1929 Jenkins commissioned Visugraphic Pictures, Inc., a New York industrial film producer, to make a series of



narrative films, also in silhouette. “In addition to action,” Jenkins boasted, “these playlets will also embody theme and continuity.”<sup>43</sup> The films made by Visugraphic included *Home, Sweet Home* (a “domestic farce” that featured a man striking a child with a rolling pin) and *The Big Fight*.<sup>44</sup> Pictures like these, broadcast by both Jenkins stations nearly every day for two years, would have been seen by every television buff east of the Rocky Mountains. One viewer of *The Big Fight* reported:

The flickering light passes through the holes in the disc before us and we see plainly the title of the picture. Then there appears on the small screen the ringside. In each corner of the ring we see the fighters receiving last-minute instructions from their trainers. The fighters get up, move to the center of the ring, are introduced by the referee and they shake hands. The fight is on.

A sub-title appears “First Round.” Then there is a flash back to the ring again. We see the two fighters engaged in a lively battle. The round is over. A large gong strikes and we see it on the screen. Then comes the second round, a lively one, which ends in a clinch, the referee stepping in to separate the fighters. At each round a sub-title is shown announcing the round and the gong is also shown. The fourth round ends in a knockout. The loser is carried to his corner and the winner’s hand is raised by the referee. It’s a short movie in silhouette, the figures appearing black against a pinkish background. Some nights I have tuned in the same fight picture with the sound broadcast, and heard the match described as the picture progressed.<sup>45</sup>

James Garside, president of Jenkins Television, was even more insistent than Jenkins on the connection between his programming and real movies. “Our radiomovies bear a close resemblance to filming technique. We record the actors, whether it be silhouette or cartoons [*sic*], on standard motion picture film. The film is placed in a pick-up device not unlike the usual motion picture projector.”<sup>46</sup> In fact, pictures of the Jenkins Radiomovies apparatus reveal it to have been little more than a conventional silent movie projector with a scanning disc attached.<sup>47</sup>

Although Jenkins was reported to have begun broadcasting from Jersey City in June 1929, he seems to have spent most of the summer in a failed effort to perfect an improved receiver. On September 27, De Forest Radio stepped in and officially absorbed Jenkins Television in a stock swap. A few months later the inventor was completely edged out of the company that bore his name, ironically placing him in the same position as Lee De Forest, who had cashed in his holdings in De Forest Radio in order to finance his Phonofilm research.<sup>48</sup> The new management wanted to move away from the Radiovision reruns the stations had become identified with and fill most of the airtime with live performers. D. E. Replogle took over the day-to-day operation of Jenkins Television, and one of his first moves was to hire a

program director, a graduate of the Emerson School of Oratory in Boston named Irma Lembke.<sup>49</sup> Although many of Jenkins's young associates from his Washington operation, including Florence Clark, had idolized him, Lembke was unimpressed by what she saw in Jersey City. "No one knew what they were doing," she told historian Jeff Kisseloff. "They had the eighth floor of an empty factory building. On the roof was a shack in which they had their broadcasting stuff. It was the beginning of everything."<sup>50</sup>

Replogle was an experienced radio engineer (he had designed the flickering "Kino-Lamp" used in many mechanical television receivers) and knew that the technical quality of the Jenkins broadcasts also needed immediate improvement. A disgruntled critic for *Radio Manufacturer's Monthly* spoke for many disappointed viewers in 1929 when he said, "It is all very good to compare television with radio broadcasting, but most certainly we cannot introduce this new science into the American home until the observer can make sense of the received image. . . . After selling John Public a 48 line television, picture the pretty mess when Mrs. Public finds she can't tell John Gilbert from Sessue Hayakawa."<sup>51</sup>

By December the company was demonstrating a new receiver with better definition and a four-inch picture. In addition to silhouette films and live performers, "it is now possible to see such 'dramatic' episodes as a posse pursuing a man on horseback by television," one paper reported, inadvertently documenting the first television appearance of the B Western.<sup>52</sup> The improvement was possible because the Radio Commission had finally agreed to increase Jenkins's bandwidth allocation; synchronized audio was sent out from a separate transmitter, De Forest station W2XCD in Passaic. The new receiver, the Model 200 Jenkins Radiovisor, could tune in both picture and sound simultaneously. Assembled, it sold for \$395, a considerable sum at the time, although cheaper sets and kits were also available.<sup>53</sup>

In January 1930 W2XCR gave a public demonstration of talking television at the Lauter Auditorium in Newark and began scheduled broadcasts of "radio talkies" every week night at 8:15 and 9:00 p.m. Because a proper studio was still under construction, no live performers were televised. Instead, the station transmitted a synchronized sound film of Lee De Forest speaking on "the present and the future of the young art." Oddly, publicity for this program featuring the inventor of the Phonofilm emphasized that the audio was carried on a disc recording, like the early Vitaphone showings.<sup>54</sup> The station also announced that it would televise a feature-length talking picture, James Whale's *Journey's End*, but whether this film was ever broadcast remains unclear.<sup>55</sup> W2XCR needed a proper launch, and Replogle eventually persuaded the Jersey City Chamber of Commerce to sponsor a grand unveiling of "the world's first radio television theater" in the newly constructed Hudson County Park House in Lincoln Park. By "television theater" Replogle did not mean theater television, but instead a theatrical space where television programming

could be staged. Why he and his staff did not use “studio,” common to both film and radio, is unknown.

From April 7 through April 12, Jenkins Television broadcast a live pickup from the Lincoln Lodge between 7:00 and 10:00 each night. Although enough police were on hand to deal with a crowd of twenty thousand in the park, inside the building “only about 200 persons witnessed the demonstration” on opening night.<sup>56</sup> First to speak was Mayor Frank Hague, who was followed by various members of the Chamber of Commerce, De Forest executives, and the Hudson County park commissioner, who gave an address on “Beautiful Jersey City.” Celebrities on hand included the Australian aviatrix Mrs. Keith “Chubbie” Miller and theatrical producer Earl Carroll. In an apparent effort to re-create Edison’s famous May Irwin–John Rice *Kiss* film of 1896, Earl Carroll was seen kissing sixteen-year-old Doris Lord, “a long, drawn-out affair,” according to one observer.<sup>57</sup> Music was provided by the Jersey City Police Band and Police Quartet.

Director Irma Lembke needed to fill three hours of broadcast time from the Lodge every night for a week and seems to have put anyone who showed up on the air. “The spectators, mostly women and children, look solemnly bored,” wrote one New York reporter later in the week. “The announcer [Wendell McMahill] calls up the performers, one by one. They are mostly children, whole rafts of children. Infant prodigies, who sing boop-a-doop songs in duos and solos, and sometimes in choral groups.”<sup>58</sup> Other performers included “a vaudeville actor made up as a drunkard . . . reciting ‘The Face on the Bar Room Floor,’” and pianist Henri Deering, who was seen in close-up introducing Chopin’s “Fantasie.” But when Deering sat down at the (off-camera) piano, the screen went blank as he played.<sup>59</sup>

One reason for the restlessness of the audience was that the performers were completely hidden by the scanner whenever they came up onstage to be televised. The heat generated by the 65,000 watts of lighting required by the system also did not help. Important visitors were led upstairs to view the transmission in a darkened room, where “the faces flicker in black and white dots like an animated woodcut.”<sup>60</sup> The picture was even worse elsewhere. Jenkins Television had placed ten receivers in theaters and clubs around Jersey City. Four failed completely. Reception on the mezzanine of the Loew’s Jersey was said to be “pretty good,” but at the State Theater there was considerable interference from a nearby radio tower.<sup>61</sup>

Few reporters had anything positive to say about what they saw. “The pinkish, constantly flickering and collapsing image was at times an unrecognizable blob of straight lines, a sort of shadow spaghetti,” wrote Donald Kirkley in the *Baltimore Sun*. “At best one could get a rough idea of the general appearance of the performer and what he or she was doing. . . . I was not able to recognize one performer from his picture, even when they were clearest.”<sup>62</sup> Although everyone involved pronounced themselves highly satisfied, the largely negative reviews of the broadcasts, printed all over the country, must have been disappointing. To make matters worse, British

television inventor John Logie Baird had gone on the air with his own “sight-and-sound” broadcasts only one week before, thus relegating the Jersey City demonstration to second place.<sup>63</sup> More seriously, on April 9 AT&T gave a demonstration of its upgraded two-way picture telephone, whose industrial-strength 72-line images, transmitted over land lines, were far more impressive than the shaky 48 lines picked up by Jenkins’s receivers.<sup>64</sup>

In the week following the Jersey City trials another Jenkins demonstration was given in Newark, arranged by the D. W. May Company department store, which was trying to sell the receivers. A Radiovisor was set up in the lobby of the Newark Theater, where the British science fiction film *High Treason* was playing. Audiences were asked to compare the 1930 television with the “1940” model shown in the film (although, as in *Metropolis*, television appeared only in the form of the picture phone).<sup>65</sup> Finally, on May 18, 1930, readers of the *Newark Sunday Call* found on their radio page what was said to be the first appearance anywhere of a regular column listing the week’s scheduled television programs. W2XCR, the only station listed, was on the air each week night from 8:00 until 10:00 p.m. The broadcast day always began with “Jenkins radio-movie silhouettes,” probably the early image of a little girl bouncing a ball, which had become the unofficial station signature for Jenkins Television. The rest of the schedule was filled with “half-tone movies,” sometimes with synchronized sound, and “direct scanning,” what today would be called live programming.

“I was supposed to put out programs for a certain number of hours a day,” Lembke recalled, “but the whole thing was so tenuous I never knew what we were going to have that day. I might interview people, like Ruth Etting, ‘Ten Cents a Dance,’ or Lee De Forest, who used to visit the studio. If I couldn’t think of anything to do, I would put on a movie. If I didn’t have a new one, I played the same ones over.”<sup>66</sup> The station also appears to have spent considerable time promoting the sale of Jenkins television kits, but because it was operating under a noncommercial license, the Federal Radio Commission soon put a stop to this.<sup>67</sup>

Depending on which source one believes, anywhere from several hundred to twenty-five thousand viewers were able to enjoy these programs. But one of the crucial hurdles faced by early mechanical television broadcasters was a lack of uniform voltage among the nation’s various electrical systems. A scanning disc motor running off the Jersey City electrical grid would send out an image that was impossible to steady on an identical machine running at a different voltage in New York. The picture would scroll from one side to the other while the viewer attempted to regain synchronization by twiddling a large knob on the front of the receiver. This was why New York reporters had to travel to New Jersey to observe these early demonstrations, and why television receivers were not selling as well as their promoters had hoped.

In order to overcome these regional power anomalies, Jenkins Television added a

self-synchronizing motor to its receivers in the summer of 1930 and staged another heavily promoted demonstration, “the first public performance of a ‘radio-vision’ show in the [New York] metropolitan district,” on August 25.<sup>68</sup> As before, the image was carried over W2XCR in Jersey City, with sound transmitted from W2XCD in Passaic. But this time Jenkins partnered with William Randolph Hearst’s American Radio News Corporation and Hearst’s local broadsheet, the *New York Evening Journal*. Receivers were set up in an empty storefront in the Hearst International Building on West 57th Street, in the Ansonia Hotel, and in an apartment at 88 Riverside Drive. The talent was considerably more upscale than usual and included such local celebrities as George Jessel, Harry Hershfield, and Bugs Baer. *Evening Journal* film critic Rose Pelswick and Hollywood showman Sid Graumann discussed “the television theater of the future.” Benny Rubin and Diana Seaby performed their own version of “the first televised kiss.” Seaby, then starring on Broadway in *Flying High*, also performed a tap dance routine, but only her head and shoulders were televised.<sup>69</sup> Unfortunately, the new Jenkins motor was not up to the occasion: “Trouble with the synchronizing apparatus caused the images to drift rapidly past the screen, so that a talkie of a singing soloist resembled a panorama of a chorus.”<sup>70</sup> If the goal was to market these receivers in New York, the transmitter would have to move there.

W2XCR was still transmitting from Jersey City in November 1930, when “election day returns were printed on the screen and picked up by hundreds of experimenters.”<sup>71</sup> By December, however, the Jersey City operation had moved in with De Forest in Passaic, and a new studio was under construction in Manhattan. De Forest began televising images from Passaic on February 23 over W2XCD, with W2XCR carrying only the sound. The station went on the air with a lecture on George Washington, “followed by a Biblical drama, [and] films depicting mountain climbers and naval activities.” A highlight was “a thrilling ride in the cab of a railroad locomotive Albany bound,” another reversion to early cinema programming.<sup>72</sup>

Austin Lescarbourea was now in charge of programming. “My assistants and I scoured the Gay White Way in search of hungry actors—hungry for publicity and often for a meal. Our ‘lizzie’ made regular round trips between New York and Passaic, bringing talent back and forth.”<sup>73</sup> The station was on the air three times each day, with a major ninety-minute block of programming at 9:00 p.m. that featured half an hour of live performance and one hour of films. Some of these films were one-reel cartoons, others were longer features serialized over several evenings. A three-part version of *Pinocchio* was broadcast in March.<sup>74</sup> Just before switching the bulk of its operations to Manhattan, De Forest televised a special edition of the *Hearst Metrotone News* that showed earthquake rescue work in Nicaragua, Mayor Walker arriving at City Hall, “and other current news events.”<sup>75</sup>

That winter there had been another of the periodic reallocations of television broadcasting frequencies and an agreement by New York broadcasters to standard-



W2XCD, the De Forest television station in Passaic, was broadcasting live performances and filmed entertainment for at least two hours a day in early 1931. Museum of the Moving Image.

ize transmissions at a rate of 60 lines, 20 images per second.<sup>76</sup> De Forest planned to take advantage of these changes by joining with the General Broadcasting System to construct an elaborate “radio television” studio at 655 Fifth Avenue. The original W2XCR license was transferred to the new studio; sound would be broadcast from WGBS in Astoria, and the Passaic station would be used only for technical transmissions.<sup>77</sup> News releases documenting this operation continued to go out on De Forest letterhead, but almost all press coverage refers to “the new television studios of WGBS,” suggesting that General Broadcasting had become the senior partner.<sup>78</sup> Both direct and indirect scanning systems were installed at the new studio, along with mobile photoelectric cell banks that could be adjusted to the subject for best results. “If a scene with several characters is televised, several banks of ‘eyes’ watch the actors move about the ‘television stage,’” the *New York Times* reported. “The engineer in charge views the images as they go on the air to make sure the electrical camera is in focus and the images are clear. Visitors in the studio waiting room see the performance on a small screen.”<sup>79</sup> The studio was said to be “attractively decorated in modernistic style with fantastic decorative effects on the ceiling and upper walls.”<sup>80</sup>



It was the first proper television studio to be used by a New York broadcaster, and when the station went on the air with regularly scheduled programming on April 26, 1931, "images of a host of Broadway's favorites" gave it a proper send-off. The show was scheduled to begin at 6:00 p.m. and run for two hours, but so many luminaries turned up that it continued past 9:00. Louis Calhern, Lionel Atwill, and Sir Guy Standing appeared in excerpts from their current plays; other guests included Gertrude Lawrence, Peggy Hopkins Joyce, Constance Collier, Primo Carnera, Lyda Roberti, Jacob Ben-Ami, Harry Richman, Maurice Chevalier, Helen Morgan, Marc Connelly, and Moss Hart.<sup>81</sup> George Tichenor, who reviewed the broadcast for *Theatre Guild Magazine*, was so impressed that he feared television would soon be offering serious competition to both Broadway and Hollywood.<sup>82</sup>

But once again problems plagued the broadcast. Although rated at 5,000 watts, the initial transmission went out at only 500 watts and had to struggle against an electrical storm that temporarily forced even powerful WEAJ off the air for an hour.<sup>83</sup> Monitors set up at the station all failed to work, so the press had to join the crowd of "several thousand interested spectators" who gathered around two additional monitors on display at Aeolian Hall on 54th Street. "But any one who knew a performer might easily have identified the player by close observation of the image while listening to the voice reproduction," the *Times* reported, a clear improvement over earlier demonstrations. R. E. Charles of the *New York Sun* (whose allusion to the mutoscope was quoted earlier) still felt that the new medium had its roots in cinema, not radio: "Those of us who can remember the infancy of the movies can easily recall the flickering pictures that used to cause such fatigue to the eyes. We recall also the blurred sounds that used to come from the first talkies. Movies and talkies overcame those difficulties. Television will do the same."<sup>84</sup>

Charles was right, of course, but the Jenkins Television Corporation, and even De Forest Radio, would not live to see that day. W2XCR continued television transmissions from 4:00 to 5:00 and 6:00 to 9:00 p.m. each day, and press coverage moved from the news pages to the radio listings, where its "television synchronization" schedule appeared alongside the programming of every other broadcaster. On June 8, 9, and 10, for example, the station serialized *The Wizard of Oz*, the 1925 film version starring Larry Semon and Oliver Hardy.<sup>85</sup> The listings announced a full schedule of singers and lecturers, with regular health, beauty, and "household hints" programs, as well as film broadcasts. But they appeared for the last time on September 14.<sup>86</sup> A few weeks later it was announced that William Randolph Hearst was acquiring WGBS. He intended to change its call letters to WINS (after his International News Service) and planned to continue the television broadcasts.<sup>87</sup>

Delays in the progress of television had been blamed on the depression as early as March 1930; by the end of 1931 the effects were unmistakable.<sup>88</sup> A fire destroyed the Passaic station on January 22, 1932, and a week later Leslie Gordon, who had taken over from Garside, called for the liquidation of Jenkins Television because

“the commercial development of television has been slower and more costly than originally contemplated.”<sup>89</sup> The same dark cloud that had snuffed out most of New York’s film production that season did the same to its first television broadcaster.

### CBS Television

When W2XCR went off the air, the hundreds (or thousands) of viewers in the New York area who had invested in a mechanical television receiver still had three other stations from which to choose.<sup>90</sup> The most obscure was that of Radio Pictures, Inc., an independent broadcaster that had no connection with RCA’s motion picture operation. Radio Pictures was incorporated in 1929 by John V. L. Hogan, a broadcast engineer whose primary interest was facsimile transmission. Hogan’s television station, W2XR, went on the air from Long Island City in 1930 with the usual low-resolution silhouette transmissions; it upgraded to 60-line, 20-frame service along with other local broadcasters in 1932. Joseph Udelson quotes a U.S. Commerce Department report from January of that year, which describes half of Hogan’s transmissions as “entertainment,” although the “standard 35mm films of figures, still pictures, rotating figures, various size letters, and silhouette cartoons” seem more like test patterns than the programs offered by his competition.<sup>91</sup> Hogan sold W2XR in 1936 (it is now WQXR) but maintained an experimental television license until 1940.

Hogan, De Forest, Jenkins, and even RCA were all primarily interested in television as a potential source of manufacturing income or licensing royalties, which was how radio itself had first managed to show a profit. The Columbia Broadcasting System, on the other hand, with no manufacturing arm and only a rudimentary research operation, looked at television from a very different perspective. William S. Paley, the ambitious young president of CBS, saw television as a new programming opportunity, with revenue to be derived solely through advertising. Paley had purchased a controlling interest in CBS (previously the United Independent Broadcasters [UIB] chain) for \$500,000 in 1928, and immediately established himself as the major competitor to NBC’s two existing national networks. Within a matter of months, Movietone mogul William Fox approached Paley with an offer to take the network off his hands for exactly what he had paid for it—a proposal that Paley considered insulting.<sup>92</sup> The CBS offices at the time were in the Paramount Building on Times Square, and no sooner had Fox been rebuffed than Adolph Zukor appeared with an offer of his own. In his autobiography, Paley suggests that Zukor’s approach was spurred by news of Fox’s interest, but he forgets (or may never have known) that Zukor had already tried to buy into the UIB chain in 1927.

Why all this interest in television on the part of the motion picture studios? The film industry had already been disrupted by the appearance of radio broadcasting

and the introduction of talking pictures. Radio had been blamed for a decline in theater attendance as early as 1925, and dealing with the electronics manufacturers over sound film apparatus had been time-consuming and expensive. The film industry had no crystal ball, but if television was the next new thing, it would have to move quickly to establish its position. Fox, according to Paley, was clearly pursuing “the union of radio and motion pictures, in a word, television.”<sup>93</sup> Some studios had already involved themselves with radio as a vehicle for advertising and promotion, but television appeared to up the ante.<sup>94</sup> As early as January 1928, when RCA joined with Joseph P. Kennedy’s film interests in an effort to promote its Photophone talking picture process, industry analysts saw “radiocasting and television” as the next logical step.<sup>95</sup> When Keith-Albee-Orpheum was brought in as part of the new RKO later that same year, the *New York Times* declared that the merger

would guarantee the old-time vaudeville chain against the steady inroads which broadcasting and films are believed to be making in the sphere of the stage and also would enable it to share immediately in the benefits which would follow the development of television to a point where television would be both practicable and satisfactory as a popular entertainment in the home.

Conversely, it is said, artists who now appear on the Keith-Albee-Orpheum circuit undoubtedly would be available for [radio] programs put on the air by the National Broadcasting Company, a subsidiary of the Radio Corporation, and in the not too distant future would be available also for television broadcasting, where it is conceivable that jugglers, acrobats, and other “silent” performers might find employment.<sup>96</sup>

Both Fox and Zukor read the significance of RCA’s move into film production and exhibition the same way: the electronics industry was again meddling in their business. Reaching for CBS was the obvious countermove. In his history of CBS, Lewis J. Paper concludes that Zukor came to Paley “because he thought it inevitable that sound would soon be wed to pictures and that television was just around the proverbial corner.”<sup>97</sup> Media historian Erik Barnouw, who worked for the network in the 1930s, also agreed that Zukor bought into CBS because he felt “television was at hand.”<sup>98</sup> But this high opinion of television’s potential was not universally shared in Hollywood. Harry Warner, who had pioneered talking pictures and whose studio operated its own radio station, saw television, at best, as way of publicizing his films. “Television will no doubt be an advancement in transmitting photography,” he had said at the end of 1928, “but to affect an industry which supplies entertainment is out of the question. On the contrary, should this invention be successful, it will be the greatest help to places of entertainment by stimulating interest direct in the home.”<sup>99</sup>

For whatever reason, Zukor eventually agreed to a complex financial package representing ten times Paley's original investment. The announcement of Paramount-Famous-Lasky's acquisition of half interest in CBS was made at Paramount's annual convention in St. Louis on June 14, 1929 (the choice of venue was significant). Paramount and CBS radio could now efficiently swap contract talent, but television was also recognized as a factor. "Scientific developments added the voice to the motion picture screen," one reporter noted, "and there is every prospect that similar developments will soon introduce vision into radio."<sup>100</sup> A week later, in an analytical piece bluntly headlined "Television Ahead Leads to a Merger," the *Times* quoted at length from William Paley's speech to the convention:

We hear a lot about television but not many know a great deal about it. One thing is certain, however. It is coming; whether it be in two years or five, it is sure to come. And with this amalgamation of interest we are prepared. Columbia can lean on Paramount for the new problems entailing actual stage presentations in full costume, to be broadcast, and Paramount knows it has an outlet in presenting its television features to the public.<sup>101</sup>

Just what "television features" Paramount was planning in 1929 were unknown, but industry analysts fully expected Zukor to make dramatic use of his new acquisition. Harold Lafount, a member of the Federal Radio Commission, assumed that a close future association was inevitable. "It is only natural that the motion picture interests, with their vast reservoirs of talent, should be interested in television," he insisted. "The 'movies of the air,' for that is what television is destined to be, will require the acme of showmanship, and there is no group better qualified to supply [them] than the motion picture producers."<sup>102</sup> That would be fine for the producers. But because Paley was speaking to an audience of exhibitors, he took pains in his St. Louis speech to emphasize that these "movies of the air" might also function as an adjunct to *their* business, "because of the size of the theater screen, which would make television more enjoyable."

Nonetheless, his vague assurances that "television will somehow fit into the scheme of things there" (that is, in the movie houses) must have been cold comfort to theater owners who were still blaming radio for many of their problems. One of Paley's biographers, Sally Bedell Smith, suggests that he was highly ambivalent regarding this television business, but was compelled to act because he shared the same assessment of RCA's plans that had moved Zukor and Fox. And with David Sarnoff predicting the imminent arrival of television at every opportunity, Paley felt that his second-place network would have to join the parade just to remain competitive.<sup>103</sup>

CBS would be the only early television broadcaster with no technology of its

own to offer. Every relevant patent was controlled by others, and most were in the hands of its primary broadcast rival, RCA. However eager Adolph Zukor may have been to move into this new territory, Paley understood the need to wait until technical standards (and audiences) had been developed by someone else. In July 1929 he moved CBS into the top five floors of its own office building at 485 Madison Avenue (a move already planned several months before the merger). Of the fifteen new studios in the building, one was already earmarked for television.<sup>104</sup> But after the enthusiasm of the St. Louis convention, things developed very slowly. Not until December 1930, eighteen months after the “amalgamation,” did CBS receive its first television license.<sup>105</sup>

In the meantime, Paramount made use of its stake in CBS to promote its upcoming feature releases on radio, the same strategy Warner Bros. had pursued since 1925. The main vehicle for this was the *Paramount-Publix Hour*, an irregular series of broadcasts on CBS's New York station, WABC, which first aired on September 21, 1929. Ruth Chatterton and Clive Brook played a dramatic scene from their current production, *The Laughing Lady*, broadcast live from the Astoria studio. There was also a live feed from Paramount's West Coast studio. On October 5 Helen Morgan starred in an adaptation of *Applause*. Tying these shows to specific films in production soon proved too difficult to manage, and subsequent broadcasts emphasized the studio's contract talent more than any individual film title. The *Paramount-Publix Hour* moved from its prime Sunday night slot to Tuesday evening and, as *Paramount-Publix Playhouse*, seems to have aired for the last time on September 23, 1930.<sup>106</sup>

W2XAB, as noted earlier, was the last New York station to go on the air during the mechanical television era; even Hogan's Radio Pictures had been broadcasting for more than a year. Although Paramount stars Maurice Chevalier and Helen Morgan had appeared at the WGBS/W2XCR inauguration on April 26, 1931, no one from the studio (not even Ed Wynn, who had been announced a week earlier as one of the headliners) showed up for W2XAB's launch on July 21.<sup>107</sup> Publicity regarding the forthcoming appearance of the new station mentioned only CBS and the engineering staff of WABC (today WCBS), which would carry the audio portion of the broadcasts.<sup>108</sup> Clearly, Paramount was not holding up its end of the amalgamation.

There has never been a proper explanation for this peculiar indifference, especially before Paramount began to splinter financially in 1931. Paramount had placed five men on the CBS board of directors, including Sidney Kent, Eugene Zukor, and Sam Katz, and the industry generally considered CBS a “Subsidiary of Paramount Famous Lasky Corp.”<sup>109</sup> It was a profitable investment (Paramount received a dividend of \$412,500 on its CBS stock in 1931), but the expected synergy never happened.<sup>110</sup> Most of Zukor's time was taken up with antitrust investigations, merger negotiations, and internecine bickering. When he realized that it would be



Mayor Jimmy Walker poses for the flying spot scanner during the inaugural broadcast of CBS's television station W2XAB, July 21, 1931.

years before Paley's television operation would ever show a profit, he seems to have lost interest in that part of the package. By the time Paley was finally ready to put W2XAB on the air, Paramount's stock was in free fall, dropping from 50 1/4 on February 24 to 5 1/2 by December 19.<sup>111</sup> Zukor must have been relieved when Paley acted to take advantage of a clause in the original agreement that allowed him to buy back Paramount's CBS shares for a very attractive price, a deal completed in March 1932. With financing arranged through Prescott Bush and Averill Harriman, Paley was again the controlling shareholder of CBS.<sup>112</sup>

The RKO deal and the affiliation of Paramount with CBS spurred considerable discussion in film circles regarding the possible effects television might have on the motion picture industry. Film critic Regina Crewe, in a syndicated piece written just after the St. Louis convention, felt that homeowners would eventually "see the development of some new device by which the family may 'tune in' Hollywood for a movie," just as they were already screening "home movies and home talkies."<sup>113</sup> But she agreed with most other industry commentators that theater owners had little to worry about from television, because patrons would always want to get out of the house for entertainment. Indeed, some critics felt that home movies themselves offered an impossibly high visual standard that could never be matched by the crude television receivers then on the market.<sup>114</sup>

One way to avoid any comparison with home movies was to restrict all transmissions to live performances. Jenkins had been looking to the motion picture business when he argued for the greater efficiency of prerecorded programming. Paley (especially with Paramount out of the picture) would draw on his own success with live broadcasts. According to Joseph Udelson, "CBS used no film in its broadcasts,"



instead filling forty-nine hours of air time each week with original programming based on established radio conventions.<sup>115</sup> The shows included the usual singers, lecturers, and beauty classes, but also regularly scheduled dramatic presentations and sporting events. W2XAB broadcast one of the earliest continuing dramatic television series, "The Television Ghost-Murder Stories as told by the ghost of the murdered. Close up projection with weird effects."<sup>116</sup> On October 10, 1931, the station provided a visual accompaniment to WABC's audio coverage of a football game between Northwestern University and Notre Dame. A "miniature gridiron board" of white lines on a black background represented the playing field. "A small football cut from sheet tin and painted white is moved by invisible wires and magnets to various positions on the field, always in synchronization with the voice of the announcer which comes from the scene of the contest." William A. Schudt Jr., the station's television director, was not apologetic. "This is the nearest we can come to projecting the actual game," he told the *Times*. "Just as soon as apparatus is perfected by which we can give images and talking pictures right from the scene of the contest, we will attempt it."<sup>117</sup> Sometimes Schudt would cut to another board that carried game statistics, and occasionally a closer shot of the gridiron model would be interpolated. An arrow indicated the direction of play, and the names of the teams were engraved on each side of the ball, suggesting reasonable image quality.

CBS appears to have continued this double system coverage of college football at least through the end of the 1931 season. In 1932 it used much the same method with the World Series: the camera focused on a miniature diamond to illustrate the radio commentator's play-by-play.<sup>118</sup> This type of sports coverage served as a model for the network's 1932 election night broadcast, when "placards on which returns had been lettered were held before the electrical eye of television station W2XAB for the benefit of those having television receivers. Pictures of the principal candidates were also broadcast and a group of studio entertainers filled in during the intervals between important results."<sup>119</sup> A few weeks earlier the station had presented a half-hour broadcast put together by the "Stage and Screen Division" of the Democratic National Committee, billed as the first use of television in connection with a presidential campaign. Helen Morgan, boxer Tony Canzoneri, and actress Rosamond Pinchot were some of the celebrities who appeared, suggesting the event was more of a star-studded rally than a modern political spot. Reporters who viewed the program on a two-foot-square monitor set up in the Chrysler Building noted the high quality of the reception: "clear enough for the observers to detect wisps of hair, a ring on a finger, or the delicate facial characteristics of the female performers." On the other hand, "The men did not come across the air so well."<sup>120</sup>

In fact, by the summer of 1932 CBS had made great technical strides in the quality of its transmissions. In July it was able to transmit both image and sound on the same frequency, eliminating the need for viewers to operate two separate receivers.

ers.<sup>121</sup> William Schudt boasted that he was staging programs with as many as three performers in the frame at one time, a far cry from the barely recognizable faces broadcast a few years earlier.<sup>122</sup> As early as August 1931, just two years after Jenkins broadcast *The Big Fight* as a silhouette movie, W2XAB was staging regular live bouts in an eight-foot-square ring, with the scanner mounted on a “swivel mechanism” to better follow the action.<sup>123</sup> The main problem was now at the receiver. Although W2XAB’s broadcasts were being received as far away as Manhattan, Kansas, and Stevens Point, Wisconsin, viewers with homemade equipment were still struggling to interpret what they saw. One in Tennessee wrote that “I am able to see the eyes, eyebrows, teeth, and notice the changes in expression. Often when some one is playing a violin more than once I have noticed a ring on the violinist’s finger.” A viewer in Montreal reported seeing a man and two women: “they seemed to be different persons.” Another, from Nebraska, wrote, “Last night I succeeded in bringing in the picture of a partially bald-headed man on my television machine. . . . The man moved his head quite often. The lips could be seen to move. . . . I hope you can verify reception of this partially bald-headed person.”<sup>124</sup>

If television was ever to show a profit, Paley would have to be able to sell time to advertisers. The more he investigated mechanical television technology, however, the less likely this prospect appeared. In November CBS began operating a low-power VHF television transmitter, W2XAX, for engineering tests, and on February 25, 1933, it took W2XAB off the air. Over the past eighteen months CBS had broadcast more than 2,500 hours of television.<sup>125</sup>

### NBC on Hold

No one, not Jenkins, not De Forest, and certainly not Paley, was so bullish on the future of television as David Sarnoff. Beginning in 1928, he regularly issued progress reports on the coming of television, which he always said was between one and five years in the future. In November of that year, soon after he opened the RCA Photophone studio at 411 Fifth Avenue, Sarnoff bundled talking pictures with television in a *New York Times* article he called “Forging an Electric Eye to Scan the World.” “With sight and sound joined on the silver screen, with broadcasting stations experimenting in visual transmission, with shadows and figures reflected in receiving devices, it is a thankless task, perhaps, to call attention to the fact that the age of sight through electrical communications is still in the birth-throes of development. And yet the facts about television need to be stated.”<sup>126</sup>

Sarnoff saw that AT&T, Jenkins, and John Logie Baird in Britain had launched a television bubble that threatened to push RCA out of its central role in broadcasting—at least as far as the public was concerned. But what was the best way to handle the

situation? Because of RCA's connections with General Electric and Westinghouse, Sarnoff was well aware of the advantages and limitations of mechanical television. He could have pressed forward with a mechanical system based on the work accomplished there by Ernst Alexanderson or Frank Conrad and quickly overpowered Jenkins and De Forest. But newspapers were already reporting on a new kind of television, not mechanical but electronic, promoted by a San Francisco inventor named Philo T. Farnsworth. A few weeks after publishing his "Electric Eye" piece, Sarnoff met in New York with another Westinghouse engineer, Vladimir Zworykin, who had designed an electronic television system of his own. Zworykin claimed his system could be perfected "in about two years, at an estimated cost of about a hundred thousand dollars."<sup>127</sup> At that price, Sarnoff decided to put his chips on Zworykin.

Sarnoff's decision to reject development of a superior mechanical system in favor of an even more sophisticated all-electronic technology mirrored his role in the sound film competition with AT&T. Vitaphone, with its spinning phonograph discs, had gotten into theaters in 1926 and quickly became synonymous with the very notion of talking pictures. GE offered the Kinegraphone as a less cumbersome alternative, but it had spent too much time in the laboratory; the major studios rejected it in 1928 and sided with AT&T. The creation of Radio Pictures and the introduction of the Photophone were RCA's attempts to play catch-up. Now Sarnoff had again decided to pursue a high-tech alternative, and once again he had to contend with a rival already in the field. This time he was determined not to be pushed out of the market before the game had really begun. For the next five years he would orchestrate an elaborate promotional scheme designed to promote television as a future technology while simultaneously undercutting the television that was already there.

His first move was an attempt to strangle mechanical television in its cradle by convincing the Federal Radio Commission to withhold licenses for experimental television broadcasts. As already noted, engineers from General Electric and Westinghouse damned their own work in testimony before the commission in February 1929, asserting that adequate signals could never be transmitted on the available frequencies (the "facts about television" that Sarnoff had warned of earlier).<sup>128</sup> When that strategy failed, Sarnoff moved RCA's experimental transmitter W2XBS from the laboratory at Van Cortlandt Park to a more public location in the old Photophone studio on Fifth Avenue (the main Photophone operation had already moved to the Gramercy studio). "Transmissions consist of pictures, signs and views of persons and objects," RCA vice president Alfred Goldsmith told the press. "Announcements are made frequently by transmitting a picture of the call letters of the station. The equipment is contained in a room adjacent to one of the recording studios of RCA Photophone, Inc., and occasionally actors from the sound

movie studios will appear before the photocells of the transmitter.”<sup>129</sup> Of course, this technical work was simply a placeholder, planting the RCA flag in a mechanical television industry it had no intention of actually entering.

While other inventors held demonstrations to show off the quality of their technology, RCA would bring in reporters and denigrate its own system. One such group was very impressed when Goldsmith invited them to a private viewing at his home in April 1929. For an hour they watched “moving pictures . . . as distinct and as clear as pictures reproduced in a newspaper.” RCA was then transmitting 60-line images at a rate of 20 per second every night between 7:00 and 9:00 p.m. But Goldsmith ended the evening by dismissing the entire operation. “What you all have seen demonstrated here tonight is largely obsolete as far as television is concerned,” he told them. RCA had something secret in development that would do away with the small screen and the spinning discs.<sup>130</sup> No one thought to ask why, in that case, RCA was still bringing in the press to marvel over this mechanical system—and would continue to do so for the next three years.

In September 1930 W2XBS, now operated by NBC, moved to the roof of the New Amsterdam Theatre, once home to the Ziegfeld Midnite Frolic.<sup>131</sup> The station was on the air six hours a day but was transmitting little more than its own call letters. A ten-inch figure of Felix the Cat, rotating endlessly on a phonograph turntable, became as closely associated with W2XBS as had the silhouette film of the little girl bouncing a ball on the Jenkins stations. That Felix was not just a movie star, but also a New Yorker, was only appropriate.

Whenever the competition appeared to take one step forward, Sarnoff broke into print with more predictions designed to stall audience acceptance of the new



NBC's mechanical television station, W2XBS, was on the air for six hours a day by 1930, broadcasting from the roof of the New Amsterdam Theatre. But transmissions consisted mainly of call letters and a 60-line image of local cartoon star Felix the Cat.

medium until NBC was ready. When the CBS/Paramount amalgamation seemed to promise a future for theater television, Sarnoff announced that America's twenty thousand motion picture theaters would soon be replaced by "20,000,000 home theatres, where radio sets will receive vocal and visual entertainment through television," a conclusion that would not have been well received by Paramount's Publix Theatre wing.<sup>132</sup> After the WGBS/W2XCR launch in April 1931, Sarnoff predicted that television would not really arrive until the end of 1932, when it would "find itself comparable to the earphone stage in radio."<sup>133</sup> Again, he raised questions about the relationship of television to motion pictures, which "are of peculiar significance to Hollywood":

The motion picture industry need experience no alarm over the impending advent of television. Transmission of sight by radio will benefit not only the radio industry; it also will prove a welcome stimulant, a pleasant tonic to all the entertainment arts. There will be no conflict between television in the home and motion pictures in the theater. Each is a separate and distinct service.<sup>134</sup>

Meanwhile, W2XBS continued to broadcast test patterns and the rotating statue of Felix the Cat.

When CBS put W2XAB on the air in July 1931, Sarnoff countered by announcing that NBC would put its studio and transmitter atop the Empire State Building.<sup>135</sup> By the end of the year a cable ran up from the new studio on the eighty-sixth floor to "a fourteen-foot metallic rod" that served as the building's first television antenna. Broadcasting to the home was now slated for September 1932.<sup>136</sup> But the worsening economic situation, which was already putting Jenkins out of business, was not without effect on RCA. In May 1932, as Paramount was collapsing, the *New York Times* concluded: "Television images will dance through darkness and fog but their sponsors are reluctant to entrust them to the darkness of depression, which might obliterate the new industry ere it went very far. A bad start might make television appear a toy and it would be difficult to overcome that first impression."<sup>137</sup>

RCA conducted its final public demonstration of the mechanical television era on May 17, 1932. One hundred representatives of fifty licensed radio manufacturers were assembled at the Gramercy studio and shown film and live pickups transmitted from the Empire State Building. Spinning the Nipkow disc at double the usual speed generated 120-line images, and these were viewed on Zworykin's new electronic receiver, the Kinescope. The pictures, about four by five inches in size, were described as "quite clear" or "fairly clear," with the film transmission noticeably superior to the live images.<sup>138</sup> The manufacturers, who would be expected to build and sell these new television sets, were told that the target date for commercial introduction had been pushed back to the autumn of 1933. "If it were not for

the depression the set might appear this autumn, but all concerned are reported to agree that the infant television industry must be launched when the business sun is smiling.”<sup>139</sup>

The depression certainly played a role, but it was also true that Zworykin’s fully electronic television system, which depended on a camera tube called the Iconoscope, was still not ready. Indeed, work on the Iconoscope remained a closely held secret. Sarnoff produced this final demonstration for the assembled manufacturers and then left the field to CBS, which continued its telecasts for a few more months. By the autumn of 1933, instead of welcoming the commercial introduction of a new service, the transmitter atop the Empire State Building was silent.



Helen Morgan, wearing her "Magnolia" costume from *Show Boat*, poses for the Iconoscope camera at NBC's New York studio, probably a May 12, 1939, broadcast. Photofest.



# 14

## Live from New York

### Movies and Television

C. Francis Jenkins had argued that mechanical television was worth pursuing, not in spite of its limitations, but because of them. The low entry barrier meant that anyone with skill and imagination could make a contribution and that the system would develop democratically, instead of adopting the hierarchic structure of most modern industries. Ultimately, television would belong to the people, not some patent-holding corporation. Jenkins would have been delighted to watch the evolution of the World Wide Web, which in a sense validated his concept of how a new technology might be shaped by its users. But this did not happen in the 1930s, when the modern system of television was designed and created by David Sarnoff and RCA, with important contributions by his rivals visible only along the edges.<sup>1</sup>

With no real competition, Sarnoff decided to sit on his lead and wait until the “business sun” really was smiling. Television transmissions from the Empire State Building were discontinued, and in 1934 Major Edwin Armstrong took over the space for demonstrations of his new FM radio system. If Americans wanted news about television, they would have to look to Europe, where things were developing much more quickly. On March 22, 1935, the German Post Office began an occasional series of “high-definition” telecasts (180 lines) to a series of public viewing rooms in Berlin. The following month the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) announced that it would soon begin regularly scheduled television transmissions at much higher definition than the German broadcasts.<sup>2</sup>

Sarnoff immediately began another offensive, announcing on May 7 that RCA would spend a million dollars over the next year or so to create the basis of a new

television system, “not merely the commercial development of apparatus.” This project involved the construction of a new transmitter at the Empire State, the development of a prototype program service, and the distribution of “field test receivers” throughout the New York metropolitan area to monitor the results. Instead of trying to placate theater owners, Sarnoff was now careful to assure radio listeners that television would merely supplement the older medium, not supplant it. It seemed that in Britain a drop in sales of radio receivers was being blamed on the promise of television “just around the corner,” and RCA did not want the same problem in the United States.<sup>3</sup>

By the end of the year Sarnoff was predicting television by 1940. The medium was still “in about the stage that sound-broadcasting was when we were using earphones instead of loud-speakers,” he insisted. Indeed, he now seemed more interested in promoting RCA’s nearly perfected television facsimile service, which would allow newspapers to be beamed into the home and printed on the spot.<sup>4</sup> The confusion evident in this announcement is startling. After years of work, even Sarnoff was still not clear about how this new product might first reach the public. The Germans were beginning with picture-telephone applications and small theater television installations. The British were pursuing noncommercial television broadcasting and their own theater television systems. Now RCA was planning to market a television facsimile service. None of these strategies bore much relation to “radio with pictures,” as Americans understood it: sponsored entertainment programs transmitted via commercial networks. The dismal lack of response to “public entertainment” telecasts during the mechanical era had left a bitter taste, and many who had participated in them were convinced that the future of television lay elsewhere. Indeed, a moviegoer encountering “television” at a local theater in 1936, as seen in films like *Things to Come* and *Modern Times*, could expect to see the new technology used primarily for surveillance, telecommunications, or even “home video.”<sup>5</sup>

After a decade of promise and threat, the film industry had developed a curious relationship with the new medium. Television had flopped badly on its first appearance—but so had talking pictures. Yet if talkies eventually caught on, why wouldn’t television? As with any new technology (color film was another example), the studios did not want to be blindsided; but they also wanted to avoid any rash investments.

Although isolated from the center of network radio, Hollywood did have its own television station by 1931, when the Don Lee Broadcasting System, a small local radio chain, began operating W6XAO. Chief engineer Harry Lubcke, who had worked with Philo T. Farnsworth in San Francisco, had devised an all-electronic 80-line, 15-frame-per-second system at a time when all the stations in New York were still tinkering with mechanical television.<sup>6</sup> Because it was much more difficult for amateurs to jury-rig an electronic receiver—and Don Lee’s own handmade sets

were not for sale—few local residents ever saw these remarkable broadcasts. Lubcke quietly experimented with the system throughout 1932 and then, while the higher-profile East Coast stations went silent, began a heavily promoted series of daily telecasts.

“Were I to prophesy what I really think about the development of television up to today, I would be considered mentally unbalanced by nine out of ten people,” his boss, Don Lee, told the *Los Angeles Times*. “There is no question in my mind . . . that television will be a bombshell to the theater and its allied arts, the detonation of which will rock the entire structure of entertainment activities. If some theater men knew what I do today they would dispose of some of their properties and rearrange their assets.” Lee even had the nerve to suggest that with “many large theaters dark today,” television studios could profitably be set up on their empty stages (a transformation that did happen in the postwar period, at least in New York).<sup>7</sup>

Like the early Jenkins stations, W6XAO rejected the live format associated with traditional radio broadcasting and embraced the use of filmed entertainment. In fact, as late as 1936 the station had never broadcast a live image. “Mr. Lubcke believes television will develop as an adjunct of the motion picture industry and that motion picture film will supply much of the material for television,” a Chicago paper reported that year.<sup>8</sup> But unlike Jenkins, Lubcke and his station were next door to Hollywood, and W6XAO was soon filling its airwaves with brand new shorts and features supplied to it by Paramount.

Although Paramount had washed its hands of CBS, someone at the studio was still interested in the development of television. From August 24, 1933, until the end of December the following year, W6XAO broadcast Paramount’s latest films six days a week. *Variety* took note of this experiment, but was puzzled by the fact that there seemed to be no audience.<sup>9</sup> The few published accounts were written by reporters invited to closed-circuit screenings. *Torch Singer*, starring Claudette Colbert, was shown to the press in May 1934 at the same time the Society of Motion Picture Engineers convened in Los Angeles. “Close-ups reproduced with fair success,” one reviewer noted; “it was possible, at any rate, to recognize Miss Colbert and an actor by her side.”<sup>10</sup> Local radio listings indicate that during 1933–1934 W6XAO broadcast films like *Blonde Venus*, *Trouble in Paradise*, *Duck Soup*, and *I’m No Angel*, sometimes twice a day.

Before we assign Lubcke and Lee too much credit, it should be understood that all these films were run at 15 frames per second to accommodate the scanning rate of Lubcke’s apparatus. Slowing down the projection speed by a third then made it impossible to run the films with sound.<sup>11</sup> Neither Don Lee nor Paramount was interested in attracting and entertaining a television audience, which is why they continued this curious exercise for only a year and a half. Instead, they needed to learn just how Hollywood lighting effects would look on a television screen (no

shadows, please) and whether blondes or brunettes were more telegenic (Lubcke's scanner preferred brunettes).

W6XAO remained on the air throughout the 1930s, although only a handful of engineers and experimenters were able to receive its broadcasts before 1938. Hollywood was certainly aware of Don Lee's aggressive promotion of television, but the endless test patterns and degraded presentations of Hollywood features failed to ignite much local enthusiasm. The only demonstrations flashy enough to impress the studio heads were still being made in New York.<sup>12</sup>

When the Society of Motion Picture Engineers held its spring 1935 meeting in Los Angeles, several papers addressed the developing relationship between movies and television. Harry Lubcke rejected the possibility of theater television and even declared that home television would have no ill effect whatsoever on existing motion picture theaters. "The possibility of television engulfing and destroying the motion picture industry is remote," he reassured his listeners.<sup>13</sup> The following year the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences issued a report on the industry's "psychological preparedness" for the coming of television and found nothing to worry about. It concluded that the insecurity and "skepticism" that had marked the industry's approach to talkies would not be repeated because studio technicians were fully aware of the potential impact of television and were capable of giving ample notice of anything revolutionary. Commercial development was at least two years off and even then would be "limited to home entertainment purposes in urban areas."<sup>14</sup>

"But who will guide the destiny of television when it does come?" asked the *New York Times*. "Will the radio companies assume control, as their affiliation with sound pictures seems to indicate? Or will the motion-picture industry simply evolve into a television organization which will concern itself with the transmission of images and leave the making and selling of receivers to the radio companies?"<sup>15</sup> The Academy was silent on this question. But another report that year, written for the Motion Pictures Producers and Distributors Association by A. Mortimer Prall, suggested that action needed to be taken immediately. Prall (whose father, Anning Prall, was then chairman of the Federal Communications Commission) felt that television would require enormous amounts of filmed programming and that "the motion picture industry is the only source of supply for television programs." He suggested that the film studios either buy up one of the major radio networks or create new networks of their own out of unaffiliated stations. Of course, FCC permission would be required for either move, but it would have been assumed that Prall had already checked this out with his father.<sup>16</sup>

A year later the Academy's Technical Committee was still dragging its heels. Seven months of broadcasting by the BBC was dismissed as offering "scant entertainment value" that "rarely rises above the level of mediocrity." It was strongly

suggested that the introduction of commercial television in America be delayed until picture definition could match “the best home movie projection” on a screen of at least  $18 \times 24$  inches, a goal that seemed very far away.<sup>17</sup> RCA sent Ralph Beal to address the Society of Motion Picture Engineers in Los Angeles in 1937, and his listeners must have been pleased to learn that television programming would be so costly that “the scanning of motion picture film” would dominate the airwaves once broadcasting actually began.<sup>18</sup>

These reports seemed to convince the production side of the industry that it had nothing to worry about. The exhibitors were another matter. Under the heading “Television about Two Years Away,” the 1936 *Film Daily Production Guide and Directors Annual* found “consolation for exhibitors and others long haunted by the specter of such competition” because the FCC had promised to allocate television broadcasting frequencies “with due regard to possible effects on other industries.”<sup>19</sup> Anxious theater owners may not have been reassured; in any case, they were in no position to do much about it. Frank Waldrop and Joseph Borkin, who published a study of the battle over television in 1938, found that even as the radio networks and equipment manufacturers were locked in a lengthy struggle for position, the film industry remained on the sidelines, “an unwilling fat boy trying to assume the angular position of an ostrich with head in sand.” Unless some action was taken, the authors insisted, television was likely to reduce the great theater chains to promotional appendages of the broadcast industry, “a vestigial movie house in which to test public reaction before the great exhibition to the nation by way of the radio spectrum.”<sup>20</sup>

Perhaps by coincidence, or perhaps motivated by warnings like this, Paramount Pictures Corporation returned to television on July 26, 1938, when it acquired 40 percent of DuMont Laboratories. Allen B. Du Mont had worked for De Forest Television, then continued on his own to design and manufacture cathode ray tubes.<sup>21</sup> The Paramount investment enabled Du Mont to move his operation out of his garage in Upper Montclair, New Jersey, and into the old Anna Meyers Pure Pickle Works in Passaic.<sup>22</sup> It also put DuMont in a position to challenge RCA as the launch date of electronic television drew closer. The rest of Hollywood assumed that it would ultimately control the production of filmed television programming anyway, so there was no need to start a fight with the electronics industry over network ownership. Watching from the sidelines, *Fortune* was clearly appalled that Hollywood had done “virtually nothing” about television as late as April 1939.<sup>23</sup>

One thing was clear, however: as far as television was concerned, the relationship between New York and Hollywood would echo the situation in the motion picture industry. “Entertainment” would eventually be produced in West Coast factories, while executive decisions would flow from corporate headquarters in



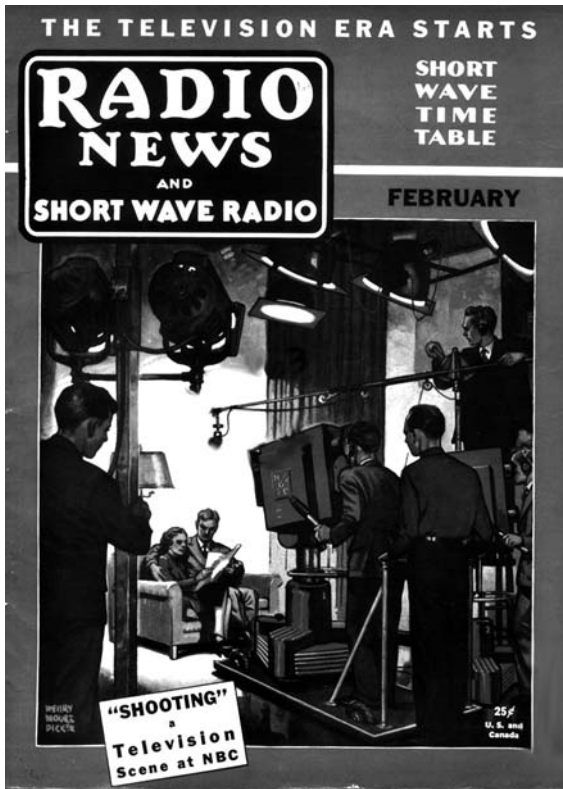
Manhattan. The pattern was already being replicated in radio, with some of the networks building large new broadcasting facilities in Hollywood to accommodate celebrities working at the studios. Still, as the *Times* noted in 1937, “no matter whether the [radio] broadcast originates in the west or east, they all get their orders from New York. Hollywood may be the stage, but Manhattan Island is the headquarters, and is quite likely to be the ‘big tent’ for a long time to come, even for television.”<sup>24</sup>

In fact, it was a very long time before even the programming function of the television networks moved to Hollywood. For another twenty years the Empire State Building, often shown with jagged “broadcasting signals” radiating from its spire, was as closely identified with American television as the catch phrase “Live from New York.” New York would supply not only the “money and brains,” as D. W. Griffith had put it in 1920, but the cultural fabric as well. Sarnoff revived W2XBS, installed a new television transmitter atop the Empire State, and in 1936 began a three-year program of operational field tests to a small number of prototype receivers scattered in and around New York.<sup>25</sup>

### Field Test Era

RCA converted studio 3H at Rockefeller Center into a “live” television studio and 5F into a “film” studio, where 16 and 35mm films could be aired directly from special projectors (in principle, not so different from Jenkins’s Radiomovies apparatus). Newsreels, cartoons, industrial films, travelogues, and the occasional feature film were going to be a significant part of local television programming in the immediate prewar era. Over the next few years, one-third of the programming at NBC and 30 percent at CBS would consist of films of one sort or another.<sup>26</sup>

On June 29, 1936, the first test transmission was sent from studio 3H by coaxial cable to the Empire State Building. Unlike in the days of mechanical television, these tests were highly restricted. Only a limited number of insiders were to have access; for everyone else, television was by invitation only, or at least that was the idea. The first guests were RCA’s licensees, who had been present at the last demonstration in 1932. On July 7 they assembled at Radio City to view a twenty-minute broadcast beamed back at them from the Empire State. David Sarnoff was introduced by Betty Goodwin, the station’s first master of ceremonies. Ed Wynn and Graham McNamee performed a skit, Bonwit Teller staged a fashion parade, twenty dancers from the “Water Lily Ensemble” provided the spectacle, and various other performers also made token appearances, echoing the variety format of the earliest telecasts. The “film studio” projected an industrial picture and an army training film.



One of NBC's first demonstrations of electronic television, as featured on the cover of *Radio News*, February 1937. Grace Brandt and Eddie Albert, the stars of NBC radio's *Honeymooners* serial, appeared in a specially written skit called "The Love Nest."

In addition to the monitors at Radio City, Sarnoff revealed that three more were operating out in the field, one as far away as Harrison, New Jersey. When the *Times* reported on this demonstration, it coyly referred to "uninvited" guests who "by means of specially built image receivers peeped under the ethereal tent."<sup>27</sup> It is unclear who these outlaw viewers were, or how many of them there may have been, but they were the only objective source of information on local television progress until at least 1938.

Indeed, reports of just what was included in these early telecasts are often conflicting and undependable. The *Times* never mentioned that Eddie Green and George Wiltshire appeared on the broadcast, but Thomas Hutchinson (who probably directed it) features a photo of this blackface act in his own account of the event.<sup>28</sup> The *Times* did cite the appearance of actor Henry Hull performing one of Jeeter's monologues from the current Broadway smash *Tobacco Road*, but Art Hungerford, who worked on the show, later claimed the performer was actually James Barton.<sup>29</sup> Hull created the part, but Barton had been playing the role since June 1934. Because production circumstances in this period were so chaotic, even official press releases

and newspaper listings are surprisingly inaccurate and were likely to remain uncorrected over trivia like this.

Leaked reports of RCA's progress continued to filter out, probably fed by those unauthorized viewers. On September 20, for example, the *Times* reported that "a few days ago" W2XBS had broadcast films of presidential candidates Franklin Roosevelt and Alfred M. Landon, a newsreel of the "Spanish rebellion," and close-ups of buttons and other small objects. One eyewitness suspected that "political campaigning by television will be practical in the not-distant future."<sup>30</sup> RCA seemed shy about revealing its hand, but when the BBC snatched the television crown with the inauguration of its regular service on November 2, 1936, Sarnoff moved to reassert control over the television story.

Four days after the British went on the air, two hundred guests were assembled on the sixty-second floor of the RCA building to see what America's electronics industry had to offer. The broadcast was viewed on a bank of fifteen RR-359 field test receivers, which featured a new twelve-inch kinescope that allowed for a seven-by-ten-inch picture. Because of the length of this tube, it was mounted vertically in its walnut cabinet, and the 343-line picture was reflected in a mirror attached to the inside of the lid (remembered by Betty Goodwin as "those crazy sets with the mirrors").<sup>31</sup> Viewed in a darkened room hung with heavy black drapes, Zworykin's receivers produced images of "fairly good definition" that varied from light green to "pea soup" green.<sup>32</sup> The forty-minute telecast consisted mainly of films, including Pathé newsreel coverage of the recent election and a backstage tour of the television studio and transmitter.<sup>33</sup>

The only live performers were David Sarnoff, Lenox Lohr, president of NBC, and the Incomparable Hildegard, a chanteuse from Wisconsin. "Before I went on," Hildegard remembered, "they told me I had to wear black lipstick and, of course, mascara. I was hideous. The lights were so hot that my mascara fell down my cheeks. The cameraman crawled under the camera and gave me a napkin to blot out the smears. They didn't stop the cameras, and I just made believe it was part of my act."<sup>34</sup> The light levels required by the Iconoscope camera (only one was used) necessitated between 1,000 and 2,000 foot-candles of illumination, about twice that needed for a Technicolor movie.<sup>35</sup> Still, *Variety* noted that "the lads with the cameras got fancy and tried some angle shots plus a little roving lens work" during Hildegard's number, suggesting that NBC was trying to do its best with only a single camera.<sup>36</sup> "The images were more brilliant than five years ago," the *Times* reported, "but only a little more detailed. Indeed, the first motion pictures were better."<sup>37</sup>

Within a few months W2XBS had increased definition to 441 lines and added two more cameras to the studio floor.<sup>38</sup> In November 1937 an elaborate production of Arthur Conan Doyle's *The Three Garridebs* was staged for the American Radio Relay League, with Louis Hector as Sherlock Holmes and William Podmore as

Dr. Watson. Four sets were constructed in the studio, and as Holmes and Watson left Baker Street for Garrideb's apartment, a filmed insert showed them riding a hansom cab through the streets of London and arriving at his door. The action then picked up live in the new set.<sup>39</sup> Much was made of the ability to intercut live and filmed material in this manner, an advance comparable to the development of editing in early cinema. "Although the image suffered occasional distortion, the action was smooth and it was always possible to recognize objects such as microscopes and museum pieces littered about the quarters occupied by Holmes and the eccentric Garrideb."<sup>40</sup>

This program (which also included short films and live variety performers) was broadcast in its entirety six times. Although "live repeats" were not unknown on radio, a run of six performances seems more like a theatrical booking, particularly when the headline feature came packaged with a supporting program of shorts. The event also raised the question of the value of live television in the first place, especially when viewers felt that "by far the best results of the evening were presented in the television newsreels."<sup>41</sup> Sarnoff understood that W2XBS needed to send its own cameras out of the studio, and in December 1937 he provided the station with its first mobile unit, "two ten ton trucks [which] consisted of a traveling control room and a television transmitter capable of sending both sight and sound back to the main transmitter."<sup>42</sup> A director in this control room mixed the output of two field cameras, and the result was then sent by microwave to the main transmitter, at a distance of up to twenty-five miles. Although the studio Iconoscope cameras included a simple ground-glass viewfinder (and were used only for carefully rehearsed productions in the 30 × 50-foot studio), the smaller field cameras lacked any sort of finder at all. Eventually a rifle sight was provided so that cameramen covering sporting events or other spontaneous activities could at least point their cameras in the right direction—but they were still unable to adjust focus. Until electronic viewfinders were available, focus was activated by remote control from the monitor truck with the aid of a small motor attached to the side of the camera.<sup>43</sup>

Getting out of the studio was one thing. More difficult was the question of what activities were best covered by a mobile television unit at all. Radio was already broadcasting sporting events, presidential inaugurations, and Metropolitan Opera performances, and television would certainly be there as well. But in 1938 two pieces of local news suggested a different focus. In November a spectacular fire on Ward's Island gutted an abandoned building in the shadow of the Triboro Bridge. The NBC mobile unit was in Astoria, transmitting pictures from the municipal swimming pool (in November?), but the staff immediately repositioned the camera to shoot the conflagration instead.<sup>44</sup> The signal was beamed by microwave to the Empire State Building, then back to monitors at Rockefeller Center, where it was "seen by viewers at Radio City while the blazes still leaped into the air."<sup>45</sup>

A year before, newsreels of the *Hindenberg* disaster had impressed audiences with their awesome spectacle, despite the fact that the event recorded on those films was no surprise. In this case, instantaneous coverage added an element of suspense that transformed a routine back-page story—the burning of an empty building—into a strangely compelling public spectacle. An even more spectacular example had already occurred on July 26, when a “deranged man” named John Warde clung to a seventeenth-story ledge at the Gotham Hotel for eleven hours before eventually leaping to his death. Thousands watched from the ground, and Warde’s suicide was the dramatic lead in the next morning’s newspapers. It was also broadcast live on W2XBS. Keeping this sort of gruesome vigil was nothing new for the American media, which had exploited similar tragedies since before the death of Floyd Collins in 1925. But thanks to a technology designed to cover flower shows and football games, events like these no longer required the intercession of a reporter. Live radio coverage might be evocative and even compelling, but television turned Warde’s suicide into an intimate human drama, a voyeuristic sensation unfolding in real time. The 1938 audience, of course, was not very large, and only a few dozen viewers would actually have seen either of these broadcasts. But the lesson was clear: even today, “if it bleeds, it leads” remains a fundamental principle of local news programming.<sup>46</sup>

The presentation of live drama, the glory of television’s subsequent “golden age,” was another problem for W2XBS. Should the station stage its own plays or come to some kind of arrangement with Broadway producers? On May 17, 1938, NBC followed *The Three Garridebs* with *The Mysterious Mummy Case* starring Tom Terriss and Dorothy McGuire. Performed five times before an invited audience, the skit made use of multiple settings, slides, filmed inserts, and camera movements, and was hailed by *Variety* as “cathode ray television’s first important milestone,” a tremendous improvement over the 1937 broadcast.<sup>47</sup> On June 7 NBC tried another approach, telecasting a scene from *Susan and God*, the long-running hit at the Plymouth Theatre. David Sarnoff and producer John Golden introduced what was billed as “the first Broadway show ever televised,” although only one scene was shown. Gertrude Lawrence and Paul McGrath re-created their roles on a slightly miniaturized version of the original set.<sup>48</sup> “Uncannily the radio lenses have a way of presenting people and plays with greater intimacy than either the stage or films,” wrote Orrin Dunlap, radio (and television) critic of the *New York Times*. “It is difficult to believe this at first, but suddenly the observer forcefully realizes it. . . . Every television seat is in the front row.”<sup>49</sup> In fact, the performance was clearly intended as free advertising for the flagging show, which would close in a few more weeks. The broadcast of *Susan and God*, like the airing of “soft” promotional films for GE and AT&T, was a barter deal that helped both parties: John Golden got free publicity, and NBC filled its air time with Gertrude Lawrence.

In 1937 Allen Du Mont had gone to London to observe the BBC's television service and returned to Montclair with an elegant Cossor receiver, one of many already available on the British market. With his new chief engineer, Thomas Goldsmith, he reconfigured it to receive the 441-line transmissions from W2XBS and made plans to begin manufacturing receivers of his own.<sup>50</sup> On June 2, 1938, a few days before the *Susan and God* broadcast, the *New York Times* announced that Bloomingdale's, Abraham & Strauss, and a host of other retailers would begin selling television sets manufactured by Communicating Systems, Inc. (later known as American Television Corporation). DuMont's sets would be on display at Davega, though not yet available for sale.<sup>51</sup> Instructions for building homemade television receivers had been circulating among radio amateurs for some time, but from RCA's point of view, this premature commercial launch was intolerable. Sarnoff took the air out of that balloon by simply shutting his station down for two months, rendering all these pirate sets useless.<sup>52</sup> Competing manufacturers, in his opinion, were little more than "parasites" and "scavengers" feasting off RCA's innovations.<sup>53</sup>

W2XBS could not stay off the air indefinitely, and far from discouraging his rivals, Sarnoff's gesture seemed to draw in even more competition. It was while NBC's station was down for "overhauling" that Paramount bought into DuMont. In October, with W2XBS back on the air six hours a week, Sarnoff finally announced his intention to begin regularly scheduled telecasts and the marketing of RCA's own receivers. The field tests had convinced him that "television in the home is now technically feasible," although still beset by "many technical, artistic and financial problems." Taking a page from Jenkins's book, he now proposed to launch the new medium as is, believing that "the problems confronting this difficult and complicated art can be solved only by operating experience gained from actually serving the public in their homes."<sup>54</sup> This change of plan was obviously not part of the original strategy, but RCA was unwilling to see the retail side of the business, the only hope for immediate profits, cornered by DuMont, Meissner, American Television, Andrea, and a host of other "parasites."

A few months later, *Radio News* reported that "the really practical sets are selling as rapidly as they roll off the production line, even in the absence of scheduled television programs at the moment."

But how can this be possible? It doesn't seem to make sense. But wait a minute. . . . The present buyers are mainly dealers and large stores. They want to cash in on the drawing power of television. Dozens of the sets are attracting crowds in the metropolitan New York area. . . . Monied folks who pride themselves on being "firsts" in most things, are buying sets to wow their friends with television reception when and as available.<sup>55</sup>



The assembly line must have been rolling especially slowly. On the eve of the launch the *Times* estimated that only one or two hundred television receivers existed in the entire New York area, “the majority in the hands of experimenters, engineers and officials of the broadcasting companies.”<sup>56</sup>

### On the Air

Sarnoff picked the opening of the 1939 World’s Fair as the most propitious occasion to launch the new service and stocked the RCA Pavilion in Flushing Meadows with an array of the company’s new consumer sets. The top-of-the-line TRK-12, an art deco gem designed by John Vassos, sold for \$595. It was a “mirror-in-the-lid” set with thirty-seven vacuum tubes, and one of the demonstration models was built of Lucite to reveal these inner wonders. But it operated at 7,500 volts, far more than any previous piece of consumer electronics and enough to throw an incautious user across the room. Smaller sets were also available, down to the \$199.95 TT-5, a vision-only receiver with a five-inch screen and no audio chassis; owners would be expected to tune in the sound on their own radios. On April 20 Sarnoff dedicated the RCA Pavilion (designed in the shape of a vacuum tube) with a remote broadcast intended to brand the new medium as an RCA creation. “Now we add radio sight to sound,” he announced, somewhat inelegantly, describing the new medium as “an art which shines like a torch of hope in a troubled world. It is a creative force which we must learn to utilize for the benefit of all mankind.”<sup>57</sup> RCA’s “official” service began on April 30 with another broadcast from the fair, three and a half hours of coverage featuring a parade of dignitaries and an opening address by Franklin D. Roosevelt.<sup>58</sup> From then on, viewers could watch an hour of live transmissions from Radio City each Wednesday and Friday, “while outdoor pick-ups will be attempted on Wednesday, Thursday and Friday afternoons.” Ten-minute test films designed to help retailers move the sets were broadcast at fifteen-minute intervals each weekday afternoon.<sup>59</sup>

The sets for sale at the RCA Pavilion had tuners capable of receiving five different stations, but purchasers quickly learned that W2XBS was the only one that actually offered programming. DuMont had acquired license W2XVT for its Passaic facility and was preparing to move into new quarters at 515 Madison Avenue, where it would open its flagship station, W2XWV. But with no experience at all in broadcast programming, DuMont’s initial transmissions were mainly designed to help its sales staff push its own television receivers.<sup>60</sup> Although DuMont’s sets were also on display at the fair, at the Crosley Radio Pavilion, the company spent most of its energy battling RCA over broadcast standards. Previously it was Sarnoff who had lobbied the FCC to delay authorization of television; now the situation was

reversed. Television programming was said to be costing him \$15,000 per week, and NBC needed to begin selling time to advertisers. So it was the competition that now urged caution, reasoning that any additional delay could only help them catch up while forcing RCA's television service further into the red. DuMont, unhappy when RCA's 441-line standard was adopted by the Radio Manufacturer's Association, accused the RMA of being in Sarnoff's pocket. RCA complained to the FCC that DuMont's own proposal for "flexible" standards (essentially no standards at all) was a ploy by Paramount Pictures to sow discord and delay in the television industry.<sup>61</sup> CBS, although it was the only interested party with no manufacturing expertise, busied itself preparing a bombshell of its own.

By February 1940, 31.9 percent of NBC's programming consisted of films; "special outside events" took up 29.9 percent, and live studio productions, 38.2 percent.<sup>62</sup> The last category included news (a camera pointed at Lowell Thomas while he delivered his regular radio broadcast), quiz and game shows, variety programming, and staged dramas. The variety format, which recalled the days of mechanical television, was generally the weakest and least popular. Audiences might see Katherine Dunham's dance company or someone displaying his stamp collection. One night they might catch the Revuers, a musical troupe featuring Judy Holliday, Betty Comden, and Adolph Green, with Leonard Bernstein on piano. But the next evening Alice Maslin might be discussing "Clothes for the Problem Figure."<sup>63</sup> The same local talent that appeared in short films for Vitaphone or Educational might also turn up in skits on NBC: Imogene Coca did her "bashful ballerina" routine

Standing before the mobile unit's stripped-down field camera (which lacked a viewfinder), David Sarnoff dedicates the RCA Pavilion at the New York World's Fair, April 20, 1939. An invited audience of one hundred watched the broadcast on a bank of receivers at Radio City. Photofest.



with Hiram Sherman in 1939.<sup>64</sup> Experimental filmmaker Norman McLaren, whose work had attracted the attention of the Guggenheim Museum of Non-Objective Painting, was commissioned to create a special *Valentine Greeting* in 1940. The two-minute animation, painted in white directly onto a strip of black 35mm film stock, featured endlessly mutating pairs of lips and hearts, and the jaunty, serpentine tag line, “We Love Our Audience.”<sup>65</sup>

At a time when most scheduled programs lacked even the sense of structure provided by a regular host, *Sunday Evening Supper* was an exception. NBC re-created the St. Regis apartment of Elsie de Wolfe (Lady Mendl), invited an assortment of café society regulars, and brought in a different chef each week to prepare an appropriate spread. “Elsie would preside with her white gloves and jewelry and her blue hair and present her friends and guests. It was awful under those lights, but Elsie never complained. I don’t think she allowed herself to sweat,” remembered her director, Edward Padula.<sup>66</sup>

The mobile unit was sometimes sent out for “man in the street” interviews, but its main function was to facilitate sports coverage. As with early cinema and mechanical television, prizefighting was an ideal subject. Over the next few years the NBC mobile unit spent a great deal of time parked outside Ridgewood Grove, the Jamaica Arena, Madison Square Garden, and a host of ball fields, racetracks, and tennis courts. The more limited the physical scope of the game, the better the Iconoscope cameras performed. The first televised baseball game, Columbia versus Princeton on May 17, 1939, seemed a good demonstration of this problem. A single camera was placed on a high parallel along the third base line at Baker Field, panning from the mound to the batter’s box with every pitch. “The ball was seldom seen, except on bunts and infield plays comparatively close to the camera,” the *New York Times* reported. “When the ball flashed across the grass it appeared as a comet-like white pin-point.” The players were unrecognizable, resembling “white flies” buzzing across the screen. Indeed, the entire outfield was invisible for the first half of the game, until lighting conditions improved after the fourth inning. Announcer Bill Stern had to provide the same information required for a radio broadcast because “otherwise there would be no way to follow the play or to tell where the ball went except to see the players run in its direction.”<sup>67</sup> Columbia’s Ken Pill hit the first televised home run, but Princeton won in extra innings, 2–1.

Results were better with the first professional baseball game televised, the first half of the Cincinnati-Brooklyn double-header on August 26. Two cameras allowed the director to switch from long shot to close-up, and lighting conditions were more favorable. Announcer Red Barber recalled in his autobiography that his main problem was providing commentary without being able to check a monitor. There was a television set, but it was back in the press room. Dodger General Manager Larry MacPhail had extracted it from RCA in lieu of payment for broadcast rights. Al-

though commercial television broadcasting was still unauthorized, Barber claimed to have plugged Mobiloil, Wheaties, and Ivory Soap as a nod to the game's radio sponsors, holding up soap or cereal as appropriate. He delivered two of these prototype commercials during the first five innings, the camera picking him out as he sat behind a table in a lower box. Between games Barber went onto the field to interview Leo Durocher and some of the players, another first.<sup>68</sup>

As soon as television coverage improved, resistance developed from both venues and promoters. "Why buy tickets and pay for transportation to a sports event or go to the theatre when one can sit effortless at home and see the same performance for nothing?" the *Times* asked.<sup>69</sup> But with radio paying \$100,000 for World Series broadcast rights, television, still not commercially licensed, was not even a player. Not until 1946, when NBC used the new image orthicon camera for the Joe Louis–Billy Conn heavyweight bout, would sports coverage show how important a role it would play in the development of American television.<sup>70</sup>

Although it occasionally stumbled onto something interesting, the mobile unit was seldom flexible enough to race to the scene of breaking news and, unlike the BBC's mobile unit, had no generator truck. A line providing three-phase, 60-cycle alternating current needed to be tapped into on location, something which was not always possible in New York. Preparations had to be made well in advance, so most of the non-sports coverage consisted of scheduled events like parades, automobile shows, or the opening of *Gone with the Wind*. On December 19, 1939, Ben Grauer covered the New York premiere of Selznick's film at the Loew's Capitol. VIPs strolled past a sign reading "AN INNOVATION/THIS PREMIERE IS THE FIRST TO BE BROADCAST BY TELEVISION."<sup>71</sup>

Anyone who noticed might have stopped for a moment to consider once again the possible impact of television on movies, and vice versa. Could this puny new medium have any effect on something so grand as Selznick's masterpiece? Would it even be capable of providing a useful income stream? Although a good part of the television schedule was already taken up by films, the average theater owner would hardly have felt threatened by the available programming. No "major studio" features were broadcast in America before the war, even though television rights had been accounted for by contract since 1929.<sup>72</sup> The reason was not that Hollywood was trying to starve its rival but simply that television was a pauper with nothing to offer. Art Hungerford, who booked films for NBC, remembered that most of his titles were supplied by Monogram, Republic, and Chesterfield, poverty-row operations all too happy to pick up a check for \$200.<sup>73</sup> Hungerford would probably have included *Mystery in Swing* in this group, a low-budget musical that NBC broadcast on May 8, 1940. Not just another B movie, *Mystery in Swing* is notable as the first race movie ever televised. Given that the few hundred families in New York who actually owned television sets were nearly all upper-income whites, the broadcast

of *Mystery in Swing* must have seemed like a visit to the Cotton Club; in any case, it was not a film they would ever have encountered in a theater.<sup>74</sup>

Feature films were not the whole story, however. Documentary and nonfiction subjects were well represented, and NBC was frequently able to screen both the *Pathé News* and *The March of Time*, no doubt because of its affiliation with RKO, which distributed both series. More significantly, RKO had recently begun to distribute the highly regarded Disney cartoons, and these also turned up on NBC. Titles ranged from the Academy Award-winning *The Ugly Duckling* to Mickey Mouse in *Hawaiian Holiday*.<sup>75</sup> Walt Disney, an early adopter whose films were also running on the BBC, appears to have seen television not as a competitor but as another way of getting his product into the home (he had been distributing his films in the home movie market for a decade). Indeed, an argument over television rights was widely believed to have been the cause of his move from United Artists to RKO in the first place. "In looking to the future," Disney said when announcing the new affiliation, "and that includes television, we believe our association with RKO offers greater opportunities for the broader and more expansive fields of development."<sup>76</sup> Although it is true that the major American studios all held back their features, the fact that Hollywood's most honored filmmaker put his strongest material on the air right from the start indicates just how quickly the new medium began interacting with the old.

It was British producer Alexander Korda who supplied the first feature-length film broadcast in New York by NBC. *The Return of the Scarlet Pimpernel* aired on May 30, 1938, only a few weeks after its local theatrical premiere. NBC was trying "to ascertain if pictures of this type are good program material and if such shows will hold the attention of the audience for an hour and a half." Despite the limitations of the RCA field test receiver, viewer response was better than expected.<sup>77</sup> A few important American features not handled by the majors, like D. W. Griffith's *Abraham Lincoln* and Cecil B. De Mille's *King of Kings*, were also shown on NBC.<sup>78</sup> But viewers were more likely to find poverty-row B movies, British films, or (surprisingly) subtitled French features. Jean Renoir's antiwar classic, *La grande illusion*, was broadcast on August 17, 1939, days before the outbreak of the next war. Julien Duvivier's *La fin du jour*, with Louis Jouvet and Michel Simon, aired on March 20, 1940, only six months after it opened in theaters.<sup>79</sup> Whether these films were run intact or edited to fit time slots is unclear; most were indicated as running only sixty or seventy-five minutes. *Grande illusion*, for example, was scheduled for a one-hour slot, but it was the last program of the evening and may very well have run on as long as necessary. Art Hungerford recalled that two reels were dropped from *The Scarlet Pimpernel* when it was aired, but he blamed projectionist error, not deliberate cutting.<sup>80</sup> It seems that schedules were not carefully attended to, in any case.

It would be almost twenty years before television could really afford major studio



productions, but broadcasters soon made up for lost time, causing a revolution in film industry economics. In 1976 CBS paid \$35 million for broadcast rights to *Gone with the Wind*. This record purchase was for a package of twenty screenings over twenty years; the first one, on November 7, pulled a 47.7 rating and 65 percent share of viewing households. That counted as another record—although Ben Grauer’s coverage of the premiere probably pulled 100 percent.<sup>81</sup>

When regularly scheduled broadcasting began in 1939, NBC started mailing a weekly program listing to each owner of a television set (whether non-RCA sets were included is unknown). Even with dealers and RCA executives thrown in, only 1,350 fliers were mailed in March 1940, a strong clue as to just how weak retail sales actually were. Recipients were asked to fill out and return an attached questionnaire, and the results indicated that movies were the least popular offering, sports were in second place, and live drama was the strong favorite.<sup>82</sup> Programs were rated on a three-point scale, and for a time *Jane Eyre*, which aired twice, was the highest rated broadcast at 2.76 (although artificial smoke generated by the “burning” of Thornfield Manor was sucked into the ventilation system of the RCA building, causing considerable confusion). A few weeks later J. B. Priestley’s *When We Are Married*, then running at the Lyceum, hit 2.85.<sup>83</sup>

Like *Susan and God*, the play was in the last weeks of its run and was re-created by its original cast (Alison Skipworth, Estelle Winwood) on a scaled-down version of the actual set. But *When We Are Married* was shown without cuts in a two-hour Sunday evening time slot. The BBC had already broadcast this same play, with its original West End cast, on November 16, 1938. In London, however, such pickups were made directly from the theater by the mobile unit, and the show was transmitted right from the stage.<sup>84</sup> NBC decided against this policy and went to the trouble of restaging Broadway plays within the confines of studio 3H in order to impose “cinematic” technique (editing, camera movement, and studio lighting) on what would otherwise have been simply a photographed stage play.<sup>85</sup>

It is almost impossible to discuss the style of these early broadcasts because there was no satisfactory method of recording live television performances until the post-war period. Conclusions are usually drawn from written descriptions, photographs of production activity, and the faded memories of viewers and participants. Nevertheless, eleven minutes of silent 16mm footage of one such production, photographed from the screen of a monitor, survives in the collection of the Paley Center for Media. At 8:30 p.m. on Thursday night, August 31, 1939, an unidentified cameraman filmed bits and pieces of the W2XBS telecast of *The Streets of New York*, a landmark nineteenth-century melodrama by Dion Boucicault. How or why the recording was made is also unknown.<sup>86</sup>

Revivals of *The Streets of New York* were common in the 1930s, and one or two productions were still touring the summer theater circuit the year NBC put its

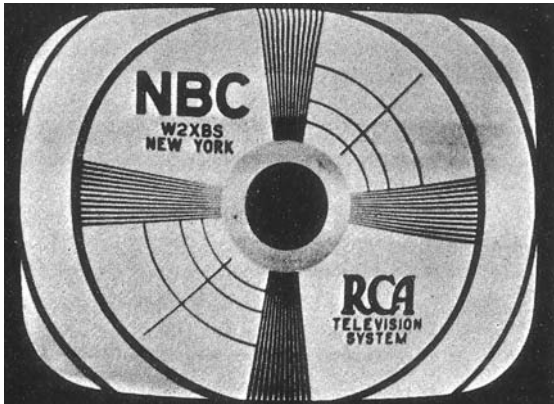


version on the air. Following a successful 1930 production starring Dorothy Gish and Fania Marinoff, subsequent revivals were generally presented in tongue-in-cheek style and lampooned the supposedly primitive dramatic qualities of Victorian melodrama. Gestures were exaggerated, moral qualities were absolute, and both characterizations and settings were two-dimensional. The actors in NBC's version, including George Coulouris and Norman Lloyd, deliver meaningful asides and occasionally make faces while addressing the camera directly. The production's deliberately campy style not only excuses its cardboard settings but also provides a dramatic shorthand that could easily register with audiences watching on screens ranging from five to twelve inches in diameter.

The surviving fragment appears to represent a selection of scenes from throughout the hour-long broadcast, but consists mainly of very short takes (suggesting a spring-wound camera) and may currently be assembled out of order. What exists reveals the camera work as surprisingly fluid and reasonably complex. At least two cameras were used in some of the scenes, which appear to have been carefully rehearsed to take full advantage of camera mobility. Indeed, the staging compares quite well with surviving kinescopes of live broadcasts from the late 1940s. The show opens with the camera tracking in to an old-fashioned theatrical bill posted in what appears to be a beer garden. Boucicault is credited, and so are the actors (who also included Phyllis Isley, later known in Hollywood as Jennifer Jones), but no technical credits survive in the film fragment. William Hawes, who examined surviving NBC broadcast logs, identifies the director of the show as future film director Anthony Mann, then working in the theater under the name Anton Bundsmann.<sup>87</sup>

With nothing else to compare it to, it is impossible to say whether W2XBS's telecast of *The Streets of New York* was or was not typical of prewar American television drama. It was obvious at the time, however, that current Broadway shows with name talent would outdraw revivals featuring little-known radio actors, but how could W2XBS afford the \$3,000 cost of mounting such productions when the station's total weekly operating budget ran between \$10,000 and \$15,000?<sup>88</sup> One solution was to cozy up to someone like Max Gordon, producer of such hits as *Design for Living*, *Roberta*, and *The Women*, who was hired in 1939 to "advise and assist" NBC on television productions. "I hope to prove to theatrical people that television is the greatest supplementary medium for their abilities," Gordon announced. "It cannot hurt the theatre. In fact it will help, and I am anxious to complete plans for our first television program so that I can invite the leading personalities of the theatre to see it."<sup>89</sup> But Gordon's initial program, a tabloid version of his current show, Jerome Kern's *Very Warm for May*, was immediately sabotaged by Actors Equity, which demanded a week's pay for every actor participating in the broadcast. Because these salaries alone would have cost "several thousand dollars," the show did not go on.<sup>90</sup>

The inability to pay Actors Equity or bid for the World Series was a function of



Test pattern used by New York television station W2XBS from 1936 to 1941. From *Practical Television* by RCA (1939).

an inescapable economic reality. NBC had begun a daily television service without the advantage of a commercial license from the FCC. Although a host of industrial films and “quasi-commercial” travelogues were aired each week, NBC was not yet permitted to charge a fee for carrying them.<sup>91</sup> Sarnoff’s goal had been to launch television at precisely the right moment, with technology, public enthusiasm, and “the business sun” all at their peak. But in the real world some factors had conspired to hold back the project while others forced it to run on ahead. The performance of the Iconoscope was never as good as Zworykin had hoped, so to perfect its system, RCA had to negotiate with the stubborn Philo Farnsworth, who held crucial television patents of his own. The economic clouds never really cleared, and in 1937 the country fell into a very serious recession. And the prospect of FM radio offered another broadcast technology that demanded attention. On the other hand, news from Europe caused Americans to wonder why RCA appeared to be lagging in the television race, forcing Sarnoff to issue a series of unconvincing assertions that America was actually ahead. And, of course, RCA was not alone in either the broadcasting business or the manufacturing field.

DuMont was already operating W2XVT out of the old pickle factory in Passaic, but its 5-kilowatt transmitter was only a placeholder until its new studio could open in Manhattan. Although W2XWV was licensed to broadcast from 515 Madison Avenue by April 1940, as late as May 1941 it was still listed by the FCC as “under construction.”<sup>92</sup> DuMont’s technology was first-rate, but it was obvious that no one at the station knew anything about broadcast programming. “DuMont mostly had movies and stills,” remembered Thomas Goldsmith, DuMont’s research director. “Most of the early stuff was just experimental transmissions to show the FCC what television was about.”<sup>93</sup> Eventually given the commercial call letters WABD (Allen B. Du Mont), the New York station would later construct three large studios inside the Wanamaker department store at Broadway and Ninth Street, call itself “New

York's Window on the World," and make substantial contributions to the postwar television scene.<sup>94</sup> In the prewar era, however, DuMont's local television operation was largely inconsequential.

### Paley Seizes the High Ground

CBS had plunged ahead during the mechanical television era, transmitting broadcasts of professional quality while Sarnoff pontificated and NBC offered only enough programming to stay competitive. With the development of electronic television, their positions reversed: NBC mounted all the early demonstrations, and William Paley held back. Mechanical television had been an engineering free-for-all, but now RCA was so clearly in the lead that Paley, with no interests in patents or manufacturing, was happy to have the competition do all the heavy lifting. The CBS radio network would become notorious for raiding NBC's talent roster, allowing Sarnoff to develop new talent, then selectively outbidding him for stars like Jack Benny and George Burns and Gracie Allen.<sup>95</sup> Paley's strategy regarding television programming would be much the same. From the sidelines he would stake a position as spokesman for the new medium's educational and artistic horizons—at least until RCA sold enough television receivers to make sponsored programming commercially viable.

Paley made his move on August 22, 1937, when he announced the hiring of critic and essayist Gilbert Seldes as CBS's first head of television programming.<sup>96</sup> The author of *The Seven Lively Arts* (1924), a groundbreaking study of American popular culture that valorized Krazy Kat, Charlie Chaplin, and the Ziegfeld Follies, Seldes had recently turned his attention to broadcasting. According to one source, Seldes was chosen partly because an article he wrote for the *Atlantic Monthly* in May 1937 "seemed to contain some bright ideas."<sup>97</sup> Unlike most cultural commentators, he had praised commercial radio broadcasting, insisting that more "pedantic" educational programs would never have been able to create a mass audience. Now that radio had penetrated into every home, appropriate cultural programming might easily follow. He suggested the same approach for commercial television—implicitly rejecting the style of programming favored by the BBC.<sup>98</sup>

In 1937 Seldes also published *The Movies Come from America*, an analysis of Hollywood cinema as a new kind of cultural export, but one that was about to be changed forever by television. "All discussions of future movies are abstract and unreal if they do not consider the interrelation between the moving picture and television," he wrote, predicting what later commentators would see as a unified "moving image media." What would set television apart, Seldes believed, was the venue: the intimate surrounding of the home rather than the cavernous social sphere of the

picture palace. ("Don't forget you are working in a postage stamp art," he would later tell his staff.)<sup>99</sup> The key to success in television lay not so much in understanding what television was like, but what it was *unlike*. "Television at first strikes us as a combination of radio and the movies; a moment's thought makes it clear that, as the movies already use talk, television is actually the projection of *the equivalent of a talking picture* in the home."<sup>100</sup> But because the home audience has not made the same personal and financial commitment to a particular program that a cinema audience has, television shows must be "more compact" and "faster" than conventional Hollywood product in order to hold viewer attention. Once audiences become accustomed to this more "energetic" approach, film style itself will have to change, because "we are not going to be content with a slow-paced picture in the theatre if we have seen a fast one at home."<sup>101</sup> Instead of seeing broadcast television as "radio with pictures," Seldes was predicting a new medium inextricably bound up with the cinema. "In the transitional stages, moving pictures will have a great effect on television," he wrote, "and in the later stages television will have a great effect on moving pictures."<sup>102</sup>

This was all William Paley needed to hear. Seldes could easily out-talk David Sarnoff, whose vague generalizations about "the future of television" lacked any sort of intellectual credibility. And while CBS navigated television's own "transitional era," there was little to lose by seeing what Seldes might do with it. CBS had just acquired space in Grand Central Terminal—a vast empty chamber above the station's waiting room—which allowed Paley to boast that he was building "the world's largest television studio."<sup>103</sup> The Beaux Arts landmark featured "big glass windows and a high, vaulted ceiling," architecturally interesting but a nightmare in terms of lighting and acoustics (not to mention the vibration created by hundreds of daily commuter trains).<sup>104</sup> As it happened, turning this hangarlike structure into a proper television studio was no easy task. Two years later, with NBC poised to begin its own regular broadcasts, the Grand Central studio was still under construction. One visitor described it as "an enormous room the length of a city block, sixty feet wide, and big enough to hold a circus. At one end rises the white pillbox of the control room with a long, narrow horizontal slit into which a plate glass window has yet to be fitted. There is a lot of equipment lying around."<sup>105</sup> The cost of the studio, and the transmitter installed atop the nearby Chrysler Building, was said to be \$850,000. Licensing fees paid to RCA pushed the CBS investment to nearly \$2 million. As a commentator for *Fortune* dryly noted, "all this money goes down the drain until the day when Columbia can sell time on the air."<sup>106</sup>

Money was tight all around. CBS had no mobile unit for outside coverage and could afford only two RCA cameras on the cavernous 80 × 60 × 30-foot stage (the rest of the space was carved into support areas). Years later Seldes recalled spending "as much as \$1,000 for an hour's program" at a time when NBC, as noted earlier,

was budgeting three times this amount. He spent \$250 for television rights to William Faulkner's short story "Two Soldiers," and another \$500 for the cast. Still, three separate sets could be constructed on the great stage, a luxury that was harder to manage at NBC.<sup>107</sup>

Without a lot of cash to spend, Seldes and Worthington Miner, who was in charge of production on the floor, struggled to find an appropriate style for their television work. "We were aware of the potential of this thing, and we were enthusiastic about learning to use it," remembered cameraman Bob Bendick. "What was a closeup in television? What does a cut mean?"<sup>108</sup> For Seldes, the justification for each cut and camera movement had to be motivated by something intrinsic to this particular medium. "'Almost or just like a movie' was not the praise we wanted," he insisted.<sup>109</sup> Miner, an experienced theatrical director who had also worked in Hollywood, took a more pragmatic approach, generating a pile of memos on production technique, which were eventually codified as "Miner's Laws." "When cutting from a wide two-shot to a tighter two-shot, retain the same focal depth of field." "In framing a head in profile, the line of vision should occupy roughly one-half the width of the frame." Although some of those closer to Seldes found these maxims a bit fussy, Franklin Schaffner, later a CBS television director himself, felt that "golden age" television style was a direct outgrowth of "Tony Miner's form of camerawork."<sup>110</sup>

Richard Hubbell, a Seldes protégé who worked for three years as part of the original CBS television group, codified his own set of laws, principles that drew heavily on the work of Soviet film theorist Lev Kuleshov. According to Hubbell, Kuleshov believed that "*in every art there is (1) a raw material, and (2) a method of composing that material which is best suited to its essential nature.*"<sup>111</sup> *Television Programming and Production*, Hubbell's 1945 technical manual, is filled with references to Soviet films and filmmakers (although *Caligari*, *Variety*, and *The Last Laugh* also make appearances).<sup>112</sup> Hubbell was heavily influenced by Seldes (who makes his short list of "prime movers" of the arts, along with Kuleshov and Aristotle), film screenings at the Museum of Modern Art, and a close reading of Vsevolod Pudovkin's *Film Technique*, a standard text employed by the Workers Film and Photo League.<sup>113</sup> Indeed, at one point Hubbell specifically describes the Seldes team as "the *avant-garde*" of television's heroic era, experimenting with "visual effects, special motion-picture film, and still pictures in combination with live narration, sound effects, and music."<sup>114</sup> Seldes concurred. "We were *pure* theorists," he remembered. "Almost all of us were eventually fired."<sup>115</sup>

CBS's W2XAB, which had signed off as a mechanical station in 1933, was back on the air using licensed RCA cameras on October 29, 1939. Whatever experimentation may have been going on was decidedly low-key. Jim Leaman, another member of the production team, recalled NBC as the real model, not Kuleshov. Every afternoon the staff would gather to monitor NBC's transmissions and pore over NBC's

weekly program announcements. "NBC would announce a show, and we would put a similar show together and have the fun of seeing how it matched up with what they did. They did *The Monkey's Paw*, so did we."<sup>116</sup> If a prizefight was scheduled, CBS staff bought tickets to see how NBC was covering it. With no mobile unit, CBS sports coverage was largely restricted to badminton or anything else that might reasonably be staged inside the Grand Central studio.<sup>117</sup> When NBC had some success with man-in-the-street interviews, CBS responded as best it could. According to Edward Anhalt, "I remember just sticking a camera out the window of Grand Central Terminal and following girls on the street, which was surprisingly erotic to the degree that the FCC made us stop."<sup>118</sup> These limitations might have driven the staff to heavier use of filmed material; but Seldes, who believed that immediacy was the primary characteristic of the new medium, insisted that CBS do as much as it could with live programming.<sup>119</sup> Anything was better than simply running film.

One way to produce live programming on a budget was to emphasize cultural and educational programs that took advantage of local resources (Seldes would later serve as dean of the University of Southern California's Annenberg School of Communications, and he became an early proponent of National Educational Television). Cultural "chats" were already a fixture on radio, although they were notoriously elitist and often broadcast on a sustaining basis (that is, they had no commercial sponsors). Seldes tried to use the special capabilities of television to present such material in a style that would be appealing to a mass audience. He persuaded the Metropolitan Museum of Art to bring masterpieces into the studio, where curators would describe them not only as aesthetic objects but also as prized acquisitions. He staged ballets with Leonide Massine and Alicia Markova, as well as Aaron Copland's *Billy the Kid*. He brought in Eddie Condon for a regular jazz series and had Burl Ives and Richard Rodney Bennett debating and demonstrating folk music.<sup>120</sup>

Ultimately, Seldes would have his greatest success with news programming, a field that CBS would dominate for years. "Seldes was a real visionary," Edward Anhalt remembered. "I don't think anybody was doing news with his format. Cutting in with film was his concept. He used maps and models. He said that just having somebody standing there to talk to the audience wasn't the way to handle it because a visual medium had to be visually interesting." Anhalt and Jim Leaman were given 16mm cameras and sent out to cover events of local interest, from Salvador Dalí's exhibition at the World's Fair to the burning of the *Normandie*, "doing things the news never got around to doing."<sup>121</sup>

CBS could not compete with RCA's mobile unit or with its access to the coaxial cable that linked New York and Philadelphia in the first intercity network. Using this cable (and a microwave relay to GE's television station in Schenectady), NBC had broadcast thirty-three hours of live coverage from the Republican National



Convention in Philadelphia in June 1940.<sup>122</sup> But WCBW (W2XAB's new commercial call letters), more than made up for this technical deficiency with an emphasis on commentary and editorial organization. On December 7, 1941, a day CBS was not even scheduled to broadcast, Seldes had an hourlong news special on the air by nightfall.<sup>123</sup> "As far as I know," Richard Hubbell wrote in 1942, "CBS Television Station WCBW, in New York, was the first to be ready with a complete, visualized news coverage of the attack on Pearl Harbor."

Anticipating such an event months in advance, the CBS Television News department had prepared graphic maps of all possible war areas—including the Pacific area. These maps, and associated material, had been planned out and to a great extent completed during the preceding summer, when it became obvious that war in the Pacific was a probability. . . . At 8:45 p.m., WCBW went on the air. The program, given by Gilbert Seldes, CBS Television Program Director, and myself, included a round-up of the news, together with the latest bulletins and background developments to add perspective. This was visualized with pictures, around two dozen graphic maps, charts, montage effects and other materials.<sup>124</sup>

Seldes's coverage of the Pearl Harbor attack was a high point of his tenure at CBS, and he remained director of the network's reduced programming operation throughout the war.

### Standards and Practices

Despite the efforts of Seldes and his crew, NBC was clearly running away with the television race. Paley needed something spectacular to put CBS back in contention, and he found it in a startling technological advance: color television. After years of squabbling, broadcasters and manufacturers had finally agreed to cooperate on a set of uniform technical standards. The National Television Standards Committee (NTSC) first met in Washington to begin hearings on July 31, 1940. It was assumed that RCA, which had by then licensed both Farnsworth's and Lubcke's television patents, would simply assert whatever standards were in its own best interests and brush away any opposition from DuMont, Zenith, and a handful of other manufacturers. Then, in a remarkable coup, CBS managed to derail the process by dazzling FCC chairman James L. Fly with a sudden demonstration of television in color. "I am not a television expert," the chairman said, "and I do not want to pose as one, but I must say I was tremendously interested by the new system. . . . I do not doubt that if we can start television off as a color proposition, instead of as a black and white

show, it will have a greater potential acceptance with the public.”<sup>125</sup> If Fly *had* been more of an expert, he might have seen through the flaws in the CBS field-sequential color system, which depended on a rapidly spinning color disc to achieve the “realism, clarity, definition and life” that so impressed him.

Peter Goldmark, Paley’s chief television engineer, had resurrected a system originally developed for motion pictures by the Kinemacolor Corporation thirty years earlier. In that process a rotating wheel fitted with one green and one red filter was placed before a motion picture camera lens; as the operator turned the crank, one frame of (monochrome) film stock would be exposed through the green filter, the next through the red. This method produced a negative record of the color values in the original, minus either green or red. Another spinning color disc on the projector would reintroduce these colors, one frame at a time.<sup>126</sup> The process was cumbersome, but it worked, and from 1909 through 1916 Kinemacolor films were made and shown throughout the world (their first American studio was in Queens, at Whitestone). But the system’s mechanical limitations led to significant aesthetic problems. As a two-color process, Kinemacolor could produce only an approximation of the full spectrum, and the sequential recording of the color information meant that every moving object was trailed by an unsightly color fringe. Perhaps most significantly, the Kinemacolor film and apparatus were not compatible with universally accepted film industry standards.

Nevertheless, the principle was revived for television by John Logie Baird in a 1936 patent, although his various color television demonstrations over the years generally explored different technologies.<sup>127</sup> Goldmark claimed that it was a March 1940 screening of *Gone with the Wind* that started him working on color; the fact that RCA had demonstrated an all-electronic color system of its own in February may also have had something to do with his sudden interest.<sup>128</sup> In any case, Goldmark fixed on the field-sequential approach as the surest and easiest solution, and had a rudimentary system in operation within a few months. By speeding up the color wheel to 1,200 rpm Goldmark was able to offer a three-color system without noticeable fringing, although driving a twenty-inch disc at this speed created new problems.<sup>129</sup> “I went down to Washington with Peter’s equipment,” Edward Anhalt remembered. “At one point in the hearings, someone moved the TV set and the wheel inside the TV went right through the set and up to the ceiling.”<sup>130</sup> But when the new system was not acting like a buzz saw, the color effects were remarkably good, certainly better than RCA’s earlier demonstration. Chairman Fly, concerned about consumers’ lukewarm interest in black-and-white television, believed that color might be the key to “greater potential acceptance with the public.”<sup>131</sup> Of course, any such distraction would further delay the FCC (and the NTSC) from rubber-stamping RCA’s version of television.

Like Kinemacolor, Goldmark’s color television system was not compatible with

current industry standards. If approved (even as an alternative system), it would have required considerable re-engineering of all existing television hardware, delaying the commercial introduction of television for many months. RCA was in no mood to cut in CBS for a piece of the licensing royalties, nor could it afford to continue its costly broadcast schedule indefinitely with no opportunity for commercial gain. After considerable arm-twisting at the FCC, the CBS color system was relegated to the “experimental” category. The NTSC finally settled on a standard of 525 lines, 30 frames/interlaced, and nearly every set in the country was recalled for adjustment. Because there were so few of them, this did not prove to be as much of a problem as many had predicted.

While bureaucrats and engineers argued over standards, the public waited to see how this struggle would resolve itself. Two years earlier, General Electric’s sales division had projected sales of 20,000–25,000 television sets in the New York area alone in 1939, with 199,000 to follow in 1940 and 414,000 in 1941. But by the end of the summer of 1939, only 500 receivers had been sold.<sup>132</sup> That fall RCA conducted a television retailing experiment in Newburgh, New York, and managed to sell about 100 more receivers through an intensive promotional campaign. Sarnoff reluctantly concluded that the sets were overpriced and decided to lower prices by 35 percent.<sup>133</sup> In March 1940 he announced deep cuts in all receiver prices, and other manufacturers followed immediately. The TRK-12 dropped from \$695 to \$395, and the TT-5 fell below \$100. Rebates were offered to the 2,500 purchasers said to have already acquired sets.<sup>134</sup> The price cuts seemed to improve sales; within days the *New York Times* reported that “about fifty sets were sold” by local retailers.<sup>135</sup> In Washington, however, the FCC considered this “dumping” of old 441-line receivers to be a surreptitious move by RCA and its licensees to freeze broadcasting standards by flooding the market before federal regulators could complete their own assessments. The commission punished RCA by canceling a proposed authorization of “limited” commercial broadcasts, which had been set for September 1, 1940.<sup>136</sup>

William Paley, who was doing whatever he could to stall the authorization of commercial television, would have been pleased by this move. But the announcement that the newly formed NTSC would soon bring order to the fractious array of competing standards appeared to favor RCA’s position again. It was at this moment that CBS chose to muddy the waters further when it raised the prospect of color television. Historians continue to debate the real reasons for Paley’s promotion of field-sequential color television. Edward Anhalt, who worked with Peter Goldmark on the system, felt that it was clearly a move by CBS “to stop RCA by sabotaging television.” Gilbert Selles insisted that “[t]he possibility of color TV gave CBS its first opportunity to defend the public from premature investment in television receivers.” According to Worthington Miner, “Peter Goldmark’s development of a mechanical form of color broadcasting set in motion a vicious corporate battle

between CBS and RCA that would defer television's flowering by eight years."<sup>137</sup> Comments like these, especially when coming from CBS's own programming staff, suggest that Paley's introduction of color had the same effect as flinging a crowbar onto the third rail—the absurd delaying tactic of a man not seriously interested in this television business in the first place, at least not in its current “premature” condition.<sup>138</sup>

The disappointing sales of home receivers, reported within days of their introduction by the *Wall Street Journal*, had suddenly renewed the industry's flagging interest in other forms of television.<sup>139</sup> Bloomingdale's installed an in-house system devised by American Television, which allowed a single mannequin parade to be visible in four different locations around the store. Later, it used the system to screen “Televisuals,” merchandising films specifically produced for television by Audio Productions. Barbara Lee fashions, Guardian shoes, and Tot's clothes were featured.<sup>140</sup> Theater television, once thought promising but later sidelined in the rush to broadcasting, was again on the table.

RCA had demonstrated a modest electronic television projection system in 1937 and another capable of screening four-by-six-foot pictures two years later.<sup>141</sup> Early in 1939 much more advanced British experiments in theater television were widely reported in America, and the Gaumont-British theater chain announced that 350 of its cinemas were about to be wired by the Baird Television Corporation, which it now controlled. The rival Odeon chain was heavily invested in the competing Scophony television system.<sup>142</sup> Within a matter of weeks the Gaumont-British Corporation of America (GBCA) was demonstrating its system in New York and negotiating for access to Broadway theaters. A twelve-by-fifteen-foot image could be produced by a projector set among the first few rows of seats. Arthur A. Lee, vice president of GBCA, planned to offer his television service as an add-on to existing film programs, a cure for “the doldrums” said to be affecting the local box office. Initially, only sporting events would be televised, but Lee hoped to tap into the broadcasts of local television stations, something that had already been done in London with the BBC's transmissions.<sup>143</sup> In January 1941 representatives of Scophony arrived to demonstrate their process, which involved “a novel arrangement of revolving mirrors,” to the convention of the Institute of Radio Engineers.<sup>144</sup> Neither of these systems was allowed to gain a foothold in America, but their presence did seem to energize RCA's researchers, who gave a heavily publicized demonstration to 1,400 invited guests at the New Yorker Theatre on May 9, 1941.<sup>145</sup>

Using new Schmidt optics technology, RCA succeeded in projecting a fifteen-by-twenty-foot image that filled the theater's proscenium. Lowell Thomas anchored the presentation from Radio City, about ten blocks away, introducing a newsreel, a round-table discussion, and a video presentation of the popular soap opera *The Parker Family*. After an intermission the Billy Soose–Ken Overlin Middleweight

Commercial television broadcasting was authorized beginning July 1, 1941, when NBC's experimental New York station was renamed WNBT. The change occurred in the middle of the broadcast week, on a Tuesday. Courtesy of Dick Brewster.

No. 1		(Preserve For Posterity)
<b>STATION WNBT</b> NATIONAL BROADCASTING COMPANY WEEK OF JUNE 30th -- JULY 5th, 1941 Audio frequency 55.75 mc. NEW YORK CITY Video frequency 51.25 mc.		
	P.M.	
<b>MONDAY</b> June 30th	9:00-11:00	1 Amateur Boxing at Jamaica Arena.
<b>TUESDAY</b> July 1st	2:00-5:00	2 Baseball--Brooklyn Dodgers vs. Philadelphia at Ebbets Field.
	6:45-7:00	3 Lowell Thomas
	9:00-10:00	4 Culmination of U. S. O. Drive with: Mr. Thomas E. Dewey Mrs. Winthrop W. Aldrich Mr. Walter Hoving Lt. General Hugh Drum Admiral Adolphus Andrews Mrs. Ogden L. Mills
		5 Excerpts from the "Bottlenecks of 1941"--Fort Monmouth Signal Corps Replacement Training Center Show.
		6 Truth or Consequences with Ralph Edwards.
<b>WEDNESDAY</b> July 2nd	2:30-5:00	7 Eastern Clay Court Tennis Championships at Jackson Heights
	9:00-10:00	8 Feature Film "Death From A Distance" with Russell Hopton and Lola Lane.
<b>THURSDAY</b> July 3rd	2:30-5:00	9 Eastern Clay Court Tennis Championships at Jackson Heights.
	9:00-10:00	10 Variety.
		11 Julien Bryan, Photographer-Lecturer.
<b>FRIDAY</b> July 4th	2:30-5:00	12 Eastern Clay Court Tennis Championships at Jackson Heights.
	9:00-10:00	13 Film "Where the Golden Grapefruit Grows"
		14 "Words On The Wing", a Streamlined Spelling Bee.
<b>SATURDAY</b> July 5th	2:30-5:00	15 Eastern Clay Court Tennis Championships at Jackson Heights.
● ALL PROGRAMS SUBJECT TO CHANGE WITHOUT NOTICE		

Championship was piped in from Madison Square Garden, "several hundred yards" away.<sup>146</sup> "The lobby resembled a Hollywood premiere," Thomas Hutchinson remembered, "for most of the top executives of the Motion Picture Industry were present."<sup>147</sup>

They were invited because David Sarnoff was turning back to the film industry as a way of salvaging his \$10 million investment in television. The brochure distributed at the screening emphasized the connection between the introduction of talkies and theater television: each advance required "courage" and "foresight" on the part of "far-sighted leaders in the entertainment industry."<sup>148</sup> The press had already sensed this shift in Sarnoff's policy. "As an alternative to commercialization of television for the home," the *Times* reported on the eve of the demonstration, "it was believed possible that RCA might concentrate on theatre television." The same article also revealed that Sarnoff had "disbanded" his consumer television assembly lines more than a year earlier, around the time of the notorious retail price cut, effectively throwing in the towel on home television.<sup>149</sup>

Commercially sponsored broadcasting finally began on July 1, 1941. W2XBS was given the commercial call letters WNBT and allotted channel 1; W2XAB became WCBW on channel 2; and DuMont continued with the experimental designation W2XWV on channel 4.<sup>150</sup> With a combined audience of only a few thousand, the stations' potential revenue was insignificant. Even after Pearl Harbor, sets were selling at the rate of only ninety a month, and soon all consumer electronics manufac-

turing would be diverted to the war effort.<sup>151</sup> Unlike London, however, where television programming disappeared for the duration, the New York stations continued to stay on the air with a reduced schedule (the FCC lowered the minimum required number of broadcast hours per week from fifteen to four), much of it devoted to civil defense instruction.<sup>152</sup>

Sarnoff's attempt to launch his television system in 1939–1941 had been a catastrophe, not because the “business sun” failed to shine, but because the public expected value for money. In a two-part profile of the new industry just before the opening of the World's Fair, *Fortune* had offered page after page of gloomy statistics that cast doubt on the ability of broadcast television to match the quality (and quantity) of radio programming or the visual appeal of motion pictures.<sup>153</sup> Two years of broadcasting appeared to have proved them right.

If the war had not intervened, it seems likely that theatrical exhibition would have become a significant factor in the commercialization of television, at least in the short run. Consumers were simply not buying television sets, and there was no other way to develop an audience without tremendous financial risk. Americans would have come to associate television with picture palaces instead of living rooms, and just how important those Hollywood executives might have become is an open question. When the matter was taken up again a few years later, RCA regarded the movie moguls not as allies but as opponents, and it persuaded the FCC to think so, too. In the postwar era the relationship between film and television in New York continued as a complex dance involving talent, technology, and corporate muscle. But Gilbert Seldes was right when he predicted that, by then, the relationship between the two media would have become entirely different.



Sidney Lumet, later a key figure in New York's postwar film renaissance, appeared as Sylvia Sidney's troubled kid brother in Dudley Murphy's . . . *one third of a nation*. . . Museum of the Moving Image.



# 15

## **“We Have a City Here”**

### **ERPI Is Out**

Electrical Research Products, Inc. had been organized to exploit AT&T's non-telephone technologies, so its relationship with the motion picture industry would normally have been limited to the licensing and manufacture of its sound film apparatus. But by 1933 this mandate had been stretched to include the operation of two motion picture studios and the funding of independent producers through the Exhibitors Reliance Corporation. Approximately \$4 million had been made available to producers in this manner by the end of 1935, most of it expended on films shot in the Astoria studio, including shorts from Educational Pictures, *The Emperor Jones*, and the films of Ben Hecht and Charles MacArthur.<sup>1</sup> ERPI president John Otterson had succeeded in driving the competition off the field, but as a consequence, “the staid Bell system was right in the middle of movie making, with girls, comics, villains, and grease paint all around.”<sup>2</sup> One reason the Federal Communications Commission began investigating the Bell system's business practices in 1933 was that many feared this “octopus” was using its position as a protected monopoly to extend its reach horizontally. As one history of AT&T put it, “It is a long way from universal public telephone service to the production of *Moonlight and Pretzels*.”<sup>3</sup>

By 1935 there seemed little reason for AT&T to continue its direct involvement in production and financing, a money-losing scheme whose primary value had always been to deny opportunities to RCA and its Photophone process.<sup>4</sup> With the FCC on its heels, the Bell system took steps to distance itself from its movie-making operations. On June 4 Otterson left the company when he was elected president of Paramount Pictures (Adolph Zukor was shifted to chairman of the board).<sup>5</sup> That

same month both the General Service Studios in Hollywood and the Eastern Service Studios in Astoria, as well as Audio Productions, Inc., became wholly owned subsidiaries of ERPI. George T. Burgess was president and general manager of the eastern studio; the separate Hollywood operation was run by George C. Pratt. In May 1936 ERPI absorbed the Exhibitors Reliance Corporation and merged the East and West Coast studio operations under the name General Service Studios. ERPI's manufacturing business was licensed to General Theatre Equipment Company and Motiograph, Inc. in September 1937, and two months later it sold its equipment servicing operations to the Altec Service Corporation.<sup>6</sup>

Much of this activity was driven by legal or political considerations rather than any change in market conditions. But in January 1938, in a move that would have significant consequences for the film industry in New York, Audio Productions, which had also emerged from under the Bell system umbrella, acquired the Astoria plant from General Service Studios.<sup>7</sup> Primarily an industrial film producer, it would now attempt to run the Astoria studio as a full-service rental facility—but without the support of the Exhibitors Reliance Corporation.

Frank Speidell and Charles L. Glett, who now headed both Audio Productions and Eastern Service Studios, had good reason to believe that New York was due for an upsurge in film production. In 1937 the *Film Daily Annual* had announced that “[t]he East, pioneer production center of the motion picture industry, continues to make definite strides toward supremacy in the short subjects field.”<sup>8</sup> They knew from their own experience that the nontheatrical market was also booming. And even though no complete features had been made in Astoria since Hecht and MacArthur left at the end of 1935, the local industry seemed to be getting along without them. In May 1937 Paramount returned to Astoria to film another musical insert, the Kirsten Flagstad sequence of *The Big Broadcast of 1938* (an elaborate staging of “Brünnhilde’s Battle Cry” from *Die Walküre*, for which the sets were said to have been shipped from Hollywood).<sup>9</sup> Other studios were also staying busy by hosting every kind of film *except* the traditional narrative feature. At the Biograph studio, still controlled by Consolidated and Herbert Yates, Ralph Staub directed several episodes of Republic’s *The Hit Parade* in January 1937, including Eddie Duchin’s material. John Auer spent ten days there in August shooting portions of Republic’s *Manhattan Merry-Go-Round*, probably the specialty numbers featuring Cab Calloway, Ted Lewis, and other local favorites. Even the Brooklyn Vitaphone studio was going beyond simple two-reelers. Joseph Henabery had directed Paul Kelly and Marguerite Churchill in *Speed Devils* in 1935, a sponsored feature produced for the Perfect Circle Piston Ring Company, and Joe Rothman and cameraman Bill Miller made *Dynamite Delaney* in 1937, apparently at the behest of the Pennsylvania State Highway Patrol.<sup>10</sup> The upsurge in race movies and Yiddish pictures after 1936 was also a good sign.

And perhaps the outlook for traditional features was not as bleak as many feared.

One reason for Upton Sinclair's defeat in California's 1934 gubernatorial election was the formidable reaction of the local motion picture industry to his proposed tax policy. When progressive forces within the California legislature continued to raise the issue of taxing the film industry even after Sinclair's defeat, the studios simply threatened to leave. The *Hollywood Reporter* revealed that Paramount's new production head, Ernst Lubitsch, was thinking of sending three different production units to Astoria, each to make two or more films there.<sup>11</sup> In April 1935 studio representatives met with Jersey City Mayor Frank Hague to plan a two-thousand-acre development on the banks of the Hackensack River. "If the film industry does for New Jersey what it did for California, it can write its own ticket," the mayor argued, forgetting for the moment where that industry was born.<sup>12</sup> Apparently, the plan was to build a "cooperative" studio facility in the middle of this acreage, which could be shared by various producers. Profits from developing the real estate adjacent to the studio would pay for the project, a scheme that had been successfully employed in Culver City twenty years earlier. "In addition to the purely land speculative advantages of the new studio," the *Times* reported, "the producers would use it as an ever-ready club over California when next the tax evil rears its ugly head."<sup>13</sup> The promise (or threat) of new studio construction in the East would remain a lively issue until the start of the war.

Of course, there was some filmmaking activity that no studio was eager to brag about. Early in 1937 Al Christie and Jack Skirball produced the landmark sex education feature *The Birth of a Baby*. The film was shot in Astoria, where Skirball, Christie, and *Birth* cameraman George Webber were all still involved with Educational's

Kirsten Flagstad reprises a moment from her sensational performance in *Die Walküre*, a musical insert from *The Big Broadcast of 1938* filmed in Astoria by Paramount, May 1937. Photofest.



short-film production. Designed as an obstetrical education film, it was funded by Mead Johnson & Company, a manufacturer of baby products, and presented under the auspices of the American Committee on Maternal Welfare, a legitimate social service organization. *Life* magazine ran a highly controversial spread on the making of the film in its April 11, 1938, issue.<sup>14</sup> But by the end of the year Skirball was distributing the film theatrically (it would run in the exploitation market for the next twenty years). “For all its alleged good intentions and high-powered endorsements,” notes historian Eric Schaefer, “in the final analysis *Birth of a Baby* did not seem any more virtuous than the average Esper or Cummins exploitation epic.”<sup>15</sup> Joseph Seiden’s Cinema Service Corporation produced *Sex Madness* (aka *Human Wreckage: They Must be Told*, 1938), a venereal disease exposé, probably at his Jewish Talking Pictures studio on West 60th Street. Despite the potential profits, this corner of the exploitation film business was one genre that even New York’s sleaziest producers generally left to those working in warmer climates, and only a handful of titles in this period are traceable.<sup>16</sup>

Audio Productions seems to have stayed clear of the exploitation business, and to attract some of the more reputable producers, it invested \$250,000 in a general upgrade of what was once again being called Eastern Service Studios, Inc. (ESSI). Within a few months ESSI even acquired its own Technicolor unit, the first ever based in New York.<sup>17</sup> Although no conventional theatrical films appear to have been made with this apparatus, Audio did produce some very elaborate Technicolor industrial pictures, including *The Middleton Family at the New York World’s Fair*. According to Peter J. Mooney, the most expensive of all was an hour-long promotional film for Congoleum touting the virtues of linoleum flooring. Technicolor’s own quality color specialist, Natalie Kalmus, demanded weeks of costly reshooting to maximize the effect of the product on-screen, forcing the budget from \$150,000 to an astronomical \$350,000. After the film was finally completed, the government banned the production of linoleum for consumer use as part of its wartime rationing program.<sup>18</sup>

The Hackensack River studio remained only a threat, but any interest in returning film production to New York would have heartened the people at ESSI. They were not counting on feature pictures to fill their stages, but a few “real movies” would raise the profile of their operation higher than any number of slapstick comedies or educational pictures. They started modestly. Leo Bulgakov’s Ukrainian-language feature *Marusia* began shooting on June 26, 1938. The budget for the five-week production was said to be \$45,000, substantial for an ethnic film but insignificant in terms of conventional features. William Rowland’s *Di que me quieres*, a Spanish-language production for RKO release came in on August 22. Audio’s production chief, Bob Snody, directed it himself. Although the film was announced as the first of a series Rowland would shoot in Astoria, his subsequent Spanish-language productions were made in Mexico.<sup>19</sup>



One reason these films were being shot in Astoria that summer, instead of in a more modest studio, was that Audio had finally air-conditioned five of the building's seven stages.<sup>20</sup> "Our aim is to make a small group of [feature] films a year," Charles Glett told one reporter. "By achieving this aim we will be helping the industry and the many skilled and unskilled workers living around New York."<sup>21</sup> He emphasized the advantages of New York's theater scene and the studio's experience in handling every sort of production. But one promising project, *God's Yankee*, a biography of Charles Goodyear starring Walter Huston, had already collapsed.<sup>22</sup> Indeed, the twenty-five features and fifty shorts Glett announced in August for ESSI's 1938–1939 season had shrunk to eight "scheduled" and twenty "expected" productions by October. As it turned out, even these revised figures were highly optimistic.<sup>23</sup>

... *one third of a nation* ...

Two films did get under way at ESSI in September, their arrival heralded by a cocktail party thrown by Paramount, which was serving not as their producer but as their distributor.<sup>24</sup> Broadway composer and producer Harold Orlob had taken several of the newly renovated stages for ... *one third of a nation* ... , which would be directed by Dudley Murphy.<sup>25</sup> The rest of the studio, including the entire main stage, was being readied for *Back Door to Heaven*, a pet project of renegade Hollywood director William K. Howard. But with Exhibitors Reliance Corporation out of the picture, who was paying for these films, said to be budgeted at \$200,000 and \$350,000, respectively?<sup>26</sup>

Odessco Productions, which was making *Back Door to Heaven*, was fronted by Bernard Steele and backed by Stanley Odlum, whose father, Floyd Odlum (considered one of the "ten richest men in America"), controlled the Atlas Corporation, a powerful investment trust. Orlob's Triple A Productions was officially behind ... *one third of a nation*. . . . But according to *Time* magazine, "we have learned authoritatively that [both] these companies are being underwritten by Floyd B. Odlum."<sup>27</sup> In other words, the films were financed not through ERPI or the banks, but by private investment. Odlum's Atlas Corporation already owned a large stake in RKO and would gain majority control a few years later (it was Odlum who would dump RKO into the lap of Howard Hughes in 1947). Backing these films may have been a whim on the part of the Odlums or a trial run before their eventual acquisition of RKO. In any case, it was not the sort of financial basis on which New York could rebuild a stable feature-film industry.

... *one third of a nation* ... and *Back Door to Heaven* would be the last traditional features made in New York before the war and, for better or worse, bear the hallmarks of East Coast cinema as clearly as anything made before or since.<sup>28</sup> Both films were moderately budgeted independent productions (whose box-office returns



were also modest), closely tied to Broadway and Broadway talent, and deglamorized to such an extent that their rejection of Hollywood gloss seems almost palpable. They are also among the most politically radical features ever released by a major American studio. All the villains are bankers or millionaires, and the major dramatic obstacles facing the protagonists are the capitalist economy and the hollow promise of the American dream. That both films were financed by one of America's wealthiest investors, a self-made millionaire and the son of a Methodist minister, is typical of the curious financial arrangements underpinning East Coast production in the 1930s.

"A superior climate may distinguish Hollywood," wrote *Daily Mirror* film critic Bland Johaneson, "but out in Astoria a superior spirit of enthusiasm is substituted. . . . Both the current productions are to be serious and to have a social import. The new Astoria pioneers feel very strongly that movies cannot forever continue to have nothing to say."<sup>29</sup> Most of this hope resided in . . . *one third of a nation* . . . , which was to be based on one of the Federal Theatre Project's innovative "Living Newspaper" productions. Not a conventional narrative, the play was modernist agit-prop, tracing the history of Manhattan's tenement districts to such powerful landowners as Trinity Church and the Rhinelander family. The plea for slum clearance and passage of the Wagner-Steagall Act (plus the incorporation of film footage of actual tenement neighborhoods) energized audiences on Broadway, where the show ran for 237 performances before touring the country.<sup>30</sup> But if Paramount was going to distribute it, the film needed to be transformed into a more conventional character-centered narrative.

A script was prepared by Oliver H. P. Garrett, a leftist screenwriter and one of the founders of the Screen Writers Guild. He introduced a boy-meets-girl romance featuring slum goddess Sylvia Sidney and "kindly capitalist" Leif Erickson, scion of the wealthy family that seems to own most of New York's slums. "When we got the first draft of the script," Orlob remembered, "it was amazing to note how the writer had got so lost in his subject that he seemed to be a good candidate for the radicals. The story had plenty of fire, but too much for the Hays office. We would have had difficulty because of the propaganda involved and the language used, so it was sent back for softening."<sup>31</sup> When a tenement fire cripples her younger brother (a striking performance from fourteen-year-old Sidney Lumet), Sylvia Sidney begins a campaign for slum clearance. She seems to be making progress when she catches the attention of Erickson, but his well-meaning promises go nowhere until her brother dies in a second fire, which he himself had set in order to destroy the tenement house. The film ends in an apotheosis of urban renewal, not unlike the conclusion of Willard Van Dyke's documentary *The City*.

Although the script had clearly been bowdlerized, the final result was still far more radical than a typical Hollywood slum melodrama. Even the *Daily Worker* saw fit to praise its "steam-hammer blow against the despoilation [*sic*] of human life

for private profit."<sup>32</sup> Scratching the original idea of filming on location (only a few pickup shots were used), director Murphy had a tenement block constructed on the Astoria back lot by art director Walter Keller. Like the tenement sets constructed for D. W. Griffith's *The Struggle* a few years earlier, Keller's slums are convincingly grubby, with cockroaches running up and down the hallways. "Partly because it was made in the East," wrote one local critic, "but as much because of the director's artistry, *One Third of a Nation* gives one a vivid sense of the teeming, contrasting life in New York. Never has the squalor of tenement existence been so forcefully recorded in a motion picture."<sup>33</sup>

But not quite so forcefully as had been intended. According to the *New York World-Telegram*, trouble arose as soon as a rough cut was screened for the backers, "a group of prominent bankers." The film began with a newsreel clip of Roosevelt reciting the "... one third of a nation ..." section of his second inaugural address. "Before the next sequence was flashed, an indignant cry went up from a backer in the dark room. 'This is New Deal propaganda!' he yelled. 'Strike that scene out!'"<sup>34</sup> What was Odum thinking when he (and his friends?) put their money into this picture? The rights to the play cost them only \$5,000; if they had wanted to bury it, there was no need to have gone to the trouble of actually producing the picture.<sup>35</sup>

The *New York Sun* was largely correct in noting that the play "has been stripped of its political elements," but Dudley Murphy was still able to capture some of the original production's daring juxtaposition of "kitchen sink" realism and expressionist stylization.<sup>36</sup> After being crippled in the first fire, the Lumet character is ostracized by the neighborhood children and grows increasingly bitter and withdrawn. He sees the building itself as a living presence of evil in the neighborhood; it even talks to him, narrating its history of disease and disaster. Ignoring its taunts, he resolves to "kill" it, cleansing the neighborhood with the fire that takes his own life, but also spurring his sister's liberal boyfriend to action. As happened with Murphy's handling of *The Emperor Jones*, few critics noticed this stylistic experimentation, and those who did saw it merely as a flaw in the film's "realism."

If Murphy was upset with the way his film had turned out, he gave no sign of it when the *New York Times* spoke with him just before its Broadway opening in February. "This is the only country . . . where the film capital is not located in the theatrical capital and chief source of dramatic talent. In England film producers have the benefit of all the talent to be found on the London stage. In France and Germany motion pictures draw their casts from the legitimate stages of Paris and Berlin." He spoke of his plans to stage productions on Broadway and to film them in Astoria while the shows were still running; he had just signed Miriam Hopkins to do this with an adaptation of *They Shoot Horses, Don't They?* He himself had recently agreed to direct two more independent features designed to take advantage of the city itself, a "swing musical" and "a story debunking the New York debutante type of exhibitionist glamour that's filling newspapers today." "But that's not the only

reason I'd like to work in New York," Murphy continued. "It's not just for this one picture; it's for always. I feel that the idea of New York film production is sound. There are plenty of fine writers and actors whose home is here. This is the place they'd like to be. If there were any sizeable movie activity in New York, they'd never go to Hollywood."<sup>37</sup>

If one looks carefully at Walter Keller's beautifully distressed tenement set, the remnants of a twenty-four-sheet poster for Paramount's *Mary Burns, Fugitive* can be seen plastered against a wall. Sylvia Sidney was the star of *Mary Burns*, but the inside joke goes farther: the 1935 film was directed by William K. Howard and co-starred Wallace Ford, both of whom were hard at work on their own film elsewhere in this same studio.

### Back Door to Hollywood?

Like many of those working at Astoria in the 1920s and 1930s, Howard considered himself a refugee from Hollywood and was quite open in his contempt for what he saw as a producer-ridden bureaucracy with little courage and less imagination. Howard's most acclaimed film, *White Gold* (1927), was heavily influenced by the European art cinema, especially the work of "his idol," F. W. Murnau.<sup>38</sup> He directed a string of exceptionally innovative features at Fox in the early 1930s, including *Transatlantic* (1931), with precocious deep-focus photography by James Wong Howe, and *The Power and the Glory* (1933), whose nonlinear Preston Sturges screenplay is often cited as a clear influence on *Citizen Kane*. Also successful at MGM and Paramount, Howard accepted Alexander Korda's offer to direct *Fire over England* in London in 1936. But then an assignment to direct Korda's proposed *Lawrence of Arabia* failed to materialize, and Howard frittered away two years in England, wasting his energies on B pictures and second-unit work.

By the time he returned to America, Howard had lost much of his commercial credibility. He tried to sell a story based on his experiences growing up in St. Mary's, Ohio, and the widely disparate careers of the friends he had known in this quintessential small town. One acquaintance, Jim Tully, became a tramp—and then an author celebrated for his literary evocations of the hobo experience. Another, Charles Makeley, ran with the Dillinger gang, killed a sheriff, and was shot down by police in an attempted prison escape. "I distinctly recall," Howard wrote, "and Jim Tully corroborates this, that Makeley was a swell kid."<sup>39</sup> So what roll of the dice had led to these three arbitrary and unpredictable careers? The studios in Hollywood were uninterested, and by February 1938 Howard was telling the press that Jed Harris was going to produce the story on Broadway.<sup>40</sup>

At this point, Howard's longtime friend and associate, Johnnie Walker, brought Howard together with the Odlums and Audio Productions, and set up the possibil-

ity of producing the film in the East for Paramount release.<sup>41</sup> Howard began to flesh out his story by researching the careers of delinquent boys at Bellevue Hospital, paying particular interest to the case of one fourteen-year-old who had robbed a delicatessen because "he wanted money to take his girl friend to the movies."<sup>42</sup> The final screenplay was written by John Bright and Robert Tasker, Communist Party members whom Howard had known for years. Tasker had served five years in San Quentin for armed robbery, where he befriended the imprisoned labor hero Tom Mooney. While there he wrote a prison novel that attracted the attention of MGM, which hired him as an adviser on *The Big House* (1930). Bright, co-author of *The Public Enemy* (1931), was a founder of both the Screen Writers Guild and the Hollywood section of the Communist Party.<sup>43</sup> Howard was interested in the action of "fate" and the effects of a deprived environment, but Tasker and Bright provided a classically Marxist gloss that places all the blame on America's class system and the contradictions of capitalism.

Howard, like Murphy, was full of praise for New York actors and writers, but with a \$350,000 budget, nobody was taking any chances. Unlike . . . *one third of a nation* . . . , which used a great deal of local talent, the more elaborate *Back Door to Heaven* had key personnel brought in from Hollywood. Cinematographer Hal Mohr, recently an Oscar winner for *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1936), was hired as first cameraman, with local man Bill Kelly serving as camera operator (to satisfy union requirements, Kelly was paid at first cameraman's scale). Howard also imported Gordon Wiles, who had created the sets for *Transatlantic* and had worked on Murnau's *Sunrise*. Newspaper accounts during production sometimes refer to him as Howard's "assistant," sometimes as the film's "art director." Wiles shares screen credit with New York veteran William Sauter, but he probably functioned more like a modern production designer, with responsibilities extending beyond the mere look of the sets (Mohr considered Sauter the film's "technical director").<sup>44</sup> Even the cutting of the film was not entrusted to local hands; Howard brought in Jack Murray, another veteran of *Transatlantic*.

Hal Mohr, who was not just a Hollywood cameraman but also president of Local 659, the West Coast cinematographers' union, wrote a long piece in the *International Photographer* lauding the technical facilities and support staff available in New York. Stories about old and obsolete equipment and facilities there were "all entirely wrong!" On arriving in New York, he had been surprised to learn that ESSA did not maintain its own stock of technical apparatus, but quickly realized that in New York "equipment at least equal to, and fully as modern as anything we might have expected in a Hollywood studio" was easily available from Frank Zucker's Camera Equipment Company and the local Mole-Richardson agent, Charlie Ross (the only technology missing in New York was the most elaborate back-projection equipment, which had to be brought in from an industrial film producer in Detroit). New York did lack the standing sets and other studio infrastructure that

enabled Hollywood to mass-produce B movies at low cost, but Mohr believed that independently produced A pictures could be made “more efficiently” in the East than the West. The reason was not just the lack of studio overhead charges but—astonishingly—the local union situation. Despite the “so-called economic hazards” of New York union rules, where painters and carpenters, for example, earned double-time for night work, *Back Door to Heaven* “had been done at a cost considerably below what would be considered normal for making the same film in any major studio in Hollywood!” In fact, Mohr boasted that the film was one-third cheaper to make in New York than in Hollywood.<sup>45</sup>

Why would the president of Local 659 praise the production of *Back Door to Heaven* in New York? Hollywood labor politics were then in upheaval, and Mohr’s own role in the union was certainly controversial. But in this case he was primarily interested in demonstrating that New York’s enlightened union regulations were not a drag on production and actually encouraged efficiency and creativity.

[The technician] was being well paid, and his hours were such that he never had to work when “played out.” He could always give his best efforts—physical and mental—to his work. And with satisfied workers, everyone was able to concentrate on the job, rather than giving half his energy to damning the boss or worrying about his union’s or guild’s battles with the producers or any other organization.<sup>46</sup>

Hollywood technicians might be preoccupied with “the fifth race at Santa Anita,” but at Astoria “we were all there to make pictures.”

This description seems a complete reversal of the opinions of George Cukor and Edward Dmytryk earlier in the decade, when Hollywood crews were praised for their complete focus on their jobs and New Yorkers were regarded as difficult and distracted. The crews in New York were hungry now. Mohr had an interest in persuading Hollywood producers to adopt the more labor-friendly East Coast rules, but he was certainly not promoting or predicting a wave of runaway production. It was the “technical facilities” in New York that were “O.K.,” not the key technical personnel; Hollywood-style films could certainly be made in New York, he believed, but only by Hollywood craftsmen. The notion that indigenous New York film production might ever become strong enough to drain business away from Hollywood does not seem to have entered his mind.

Howard may have gathered a conventional Hollywood crew behind the camera, but in casting the film, he avoided well-known Hollywood stars, preferring Broadway actors whose film experience was mainly in character or supporting roles. “The Broadway theatre yields new faces for picture production that are a welcome contrast to the familiar types of Central Casting,” he wrote. “New York, the world’s greatest talent center, is only a nickel subway ride from the studios.”<sup>47</sup>

Wallace Ford, quite visible on screen a few years earlier, had more recently been working on Broadway, where in 1937 he created the role of George in the original production of *Of Mice and Men*. As the central character in *Back Door to Heaven*, a boy from "the wrong side of the tracks" whose inevitable bad end is governed by forces entirely out of his control, he would have to carry the dramatic weight of the picture. Van Heflin, who had made little impression in five earlier Hollywood features, was then better known as a stage performer. He had won some attention in Elia Kazan's 1938 Group Theatre production *Casey Jones*, and even before *Back Door to Heaven* was ready for theaters he was back on Broadway in *The Philadelphia Story*, in the role Jimmy Stewart would play in the film version. Aline MacMahon was another Broadway veteran who had returned to New York after nearly a decade of character roles in Hollywood (at the Maxine Elliott Theatre in 1939 she would star opposite Wallace Ford in *Kindred*, an unsuccessful melodrama). Jimmy Lydon, who played Ford's character as a child, was a busy Broadway juvenile with no screen experience whatsoever. Howard signed him to a personal contract that eventually led to Lydon's subsequent screen career and starring role in the popular "Henry Aldrich" series at Paramount.<sup>48</sup> Patricia Ellis, another veteran with a long string of minor screen roles, was the film's nominal love interest. She seems to have had little stage experience but was Howard's current girlfriend.<sup>49</sup>

In 1939 Hollywood's "institutional mode of discourse" completely dominated the commercial cinema. Films were goal-driven narratives in which audiences were encouraged to identify with the central character (generally through the casting of a popular star) in his or her confrontation with a series of dramatic obstacles. Boy-meets-girl love interest was almost obligatory. Although a happy ending for the main character was not a necessity, a film did need to provide some sense of positive dramatic resolution. And even if every character could not solve every problem, life was not to be shown as a series of intractable obstacles. These values and strategies were the bulwark of Hollywood's great successes that year, from *Gone with the Wind* to *Stagecoach* to *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*. Howard, ensconced in New York, wanted to turn this structure on its head.

*Back Door to Heaven* is the story of a handful of small-town characters whose lives are remarkably passive and unsuccessful. Some have goals, but the only one to achieve them is the obnoxious son of the local banker, who simply inherits the family business. Even the . . . *one third of a nation* . . . company knew enough to build their film around a certifiable star. Howard, on the contrary, employed skilled actors who had already demonstrated their *lack* of whatever it was that Hollywood insisted "movie stars" should possess. There would be no easy identification with these characters.<sup>50</sup>

Even more remarkable was Howard's perverse handling of the film's dramatic action. In the course of the film the main character, Frankie, breaks into a shop to steal a harmonica so that he will have something to demonstrate on graduation day.





William K. Howard directs Aline MacMahon in *Back Door to Heaven*. Hollywood cameraman Hal Mohr, consulting with the script clerk, was doubled by local union man Bill Kelly, standing behind the camera. The man in the hat is Johnnie Walker, a silent film actor who had become an independent New York producer.

This transgression sends him to reform school and a subsequent criminal career. As an adult, he participates in a lunch counter robbery in which the owner is shot. He is sentenced to death for the killing but escapes from prison. Finally he is shot down by deputies outside his old small-town schoolhouse. None of these surefire dramatic episodes, certain to get an audience's adrenalin flowing, is shown directly. Frankie and his gang assemble outside the lunch counter, where our attention is focused on a blind beggar and one criminal's interest in a pie in the window (a bizarre "take the cannoli" moment). The camera stays outside during the holdup, the blind man shouting "What's happening?!" as gunshots ring out. The jury's announcement, "We find the defendant . . .," is truncated; we learn the inevitable final word only in the subsequent scene. One moment Frankie is behind bars in the death house; a lap dissolve reveals he has escaped. Frankie says goodbye to his friends and flees the schoolhouse; a hail of gunfire is heard off-screen. Those inside are too stunned and depressed to look out the window.

This approach did not go unnoticed. "For once directors have discovered new shadows in prison yards and cell-blocks, and, with great shrewdness, have over-

looked all the habitual clichés of the genre," one critic wrote. "The picture is rich with the virtues of omission. . . . A pie in the window and a [gun] shot in the background are enough to give us a holdup in a lunchroom. Sometimes the elliptical treatment may appear brusque; the technique may seem too abrupt. It certainly also seems refreshing."<sup>51</sup> A melodrama without drama, stars, or any hope of positive resolution was an impossible project for the American cinema in 1939, East Coast or West Coast. By comparison, Howard's film made . . . *one third of a nation* . . . look like a romantic fantasy by Mitchell Leisen. Paramount ordered "revisions" before putting the film into distribution, but the problems with this film were structural and not amenable to some easy fix.<sup>52</sup> Even supportive New York critics recoiled from Howard's relentless fatalism, and Archer Winsten correctly characterized the performances as "lugubrious," "melancholy," "depressing," and "gloomy."

Whenever an attempt is made to produce motion pictures here in New York everyone hopes for unusual departures from the routine of picture making. Here, far from ignoble Hollywood influences, on which all bad pictures are blamed, far from the unrealistic states of mind which prevail in that world of make-believe, here a few minutes from [the] metropolitan stimuli of Broadway, the Theatre, the Thinkers, the Wits, and the People, it should be a simple task to assemble a great picture. But apparently it is no easier.<sup>53</sup>

Winsten wanted New York films to be smarter and more "realistic" than Hollywood's, but he also wanted them to play according to Hollywood's rules. Howard's rejection of Hollywood conventions was not an acceptable alternative.

Howard must have known what was coming and came out swinging in a remarkable pre-release interview with Eileen Creelman. "It's the best thing I've ever done. It's even better than *White Gold*," he insisted. "I tell you, it's the greatest picture lying around anywhere, in Hollywood or New York or Pittsburgh or Kansas City or Paris or Berlin or anywhere. Anywhere! It's good, I tell you!"<sup>54</sup> The fact that Howard cited *White Gold*, a critical favorite that was also one of his few commercial failures, suggests he knew that what he had created was an art film, a work of personal cinema that might be received better in Berlin and Paris than Pittsburgh or Kansas City. The picture was so personal, in fact, that Howard not only acted in it—he plays the district attorney who successfully prosecutes Frankie for murder—he even gave his family album to William Sauter as a guide in detailing the sets.<sup>55</sup> Sixty of these sets were constructed for the film, an unusually large number for a moderately budgeted feature. Crews photographed back-projection plates in Cleveland, St. Mary's, and the Ohio State Penitentiary, and the local Rockhill railroad station stood in for the original in St. Mary's. But many exteriors—including Frankie's entire neighborhood—were built on the main stage in Astoria. None of the action takes place in New York; everything we see in this cinematic memoir is artificial, a strange

mix of fable and fact that recalls Erich von Stroheim's reconstructed fantasies of Vienna photographed on the back lots at Paramount or Universal.

When combined with the film's insistent fatalism, this curious *mise-en-scène* suggests such American predecessors as *Greed* (1924) or *The Salvation Hunters* (1925), and especially Fritz Lang's *You Only Live Once* (1937). There are also certain echoes of the German street films of the 1920s and the current French wave of "poetic realism," early examples of which Howard may have seen while he was in England. Yet French filmmakers offered audiences glamorous stars like Jean Gabin and Simone Simon, and were not shy about ending something like *Le jour se lève* (1939) in a hail of bullets and gas bombs. *Greed* may have been depressing, but it hardly shied away from the dramatization of violence and murder. *The Salvation Hunters*, despite its garbage-scow setting, has a happy ending. And even though *Die Strasse* and other Weimar-era features take a dim view of rebellious longings, they do suggest that things will work out agreeably for those content to sit at home by the fireside.<sup>56</sup> Some of this atmosphere could later be found in certain examples of American film noir, especially in a film like Edgar G. Ulmer's *Detour*. But however seedy and miserable the protagonist's condition in *Detour*, at least he has a goal, and Ulmer as director does whatever he can to exploit the film's physical violence and action. *You Only Live Once*, another tale of a misunderstood youth who comes to a bad end because he "never had a chance" in life, was far more romantic than *Back Door to Heaven* and softened the impact of its tragic ending with an invocation of God's ultimate mercy. As the hero is gunned down by police, Father Dolan promises him, "You're free, Eddie, the gates are open!"<sup>57</sup>

Howard offers no such concessions. And to make matters worse, his film moves beyond the "bad luck" of simple fatalism to offer a political explanation for its characters' failed lives. Indeed, much of the film prefigures the leftist ideology of *Shoeshine*, *Bicycle Thieves*, and other postwar classics of Italian neorealism, probably the contribution of Tasker and Bright. "It's just the story of people who do their best," Howard said. "Whatever they are, they are doing their best, all kinds of people. They're all trying, even when they're doing the wrong thing."<sup>58</sup> But trying is not enough, and just as all misfortune cannot be explained by a run of bad luck, working hard and playing by the rules is no guarantee of success. Early in the film, Frankie's graduating class sits through what appears to be the school's stock commencement address, "Packing One's Trunk for the Journey." Self-discipline, restraint, and respect for law and order will make of their lives "a glorious and happy adventure," or so they are told by the first of many stuffed-shirt authority figures. The students are not so much unconvinced as uncomprehending. "What's he *talking* about?" Frankie asks. As it happens, their lives will actually be governed by who they know, how much money they have, and "the breaks," all of which seem to go against them in a most un-Hollywood fashion. The Patricia Ellis character, a would-be chanteuse, dazzles the cast and crew of a third-rate revue when she auditions to replace their

temporarily incapacitated star (the sequence was shot backstage at a real theater on 42nd Street). But this is not Hollywood's *42nd Street*, so the star recovers at the last moment and Ellis never gets the chance to go on.<sup>59</sup>

That one scene alone would mark *Back Door to Heaven* as aberrant and oppositional, but Howard filled the entire picture with similar "departures from the routine." Indeed, using Hollywood technique and technicians to create a film that rejected Hollywood content and style seems to have been Howard's organizing principle here. As one local critic suggested, "The most exciting prediction that anyone will make about it is that it is different."<sup>60</sup>

Both . . . *one third of a nation* . . . and *Back Door to Heaven* failed at the box office, and their producing companies never made the subsequent films they had announced. According to William K. Everson, in the late 1940s the films were sold as a pair to a low-budget distributor, "retitled and exploited via some of the most tasteless, sex-and-violence ridden ads of all times (even by *today's* standards!)."<sup>61</sup> Both films essentially disappeared from view. A few gray-market copies circulate on home video, the fate of most other independent New York productions of the prewar era.

### Troubled Horizon

While . . . *one third of a nation* . . . and *Back Door to Heaven* were under production in Astoria, New York Mayor Fiorello La Guardia was visiting Walter Wanger in Hollywood (they had flown together on the Italian front during the war). Wanger had taken a leading role in the industry's anticensorship campaign, an initiative the mayor apparently supported when he told reporters that the screen should be as free as the press. But he also railed against the "cheap thrillers" that Hollywood produced in such profusion. "That's the kind of picture we want to keep out of our small neighborhood houses in New York," he told the local press corps. "I don't believe they do our young people any good."<sup>62</sup>

La Guardia had never expressed much interest in the film business, but now, on his first trip to a studio, he extended his tour by a full hour in order to watch violinist Jascha Heifetz miming to playback recordings.<sup>63</sup> He may also have spent some time talking to his old friend about the financial problems that currently plagued Wanger's career as an independent producer. His original arrangement with United Artists called for U.A. to guarantee a revolving line of credit advanced by the Bank of America. At the same time, United Artists had named A. H. Giannini, chairman of the Bank of America's executive committee, as its new president and board chairman. "To suggest that the bank insisted on the Giannini appointment as a condition of its financing the Wanger deal would be going too far," according to historian Tino Balio.<sup>64</sup> But by 1938 Wanger was hundreds of thousands of dollars in debt, mainly to the Bank of America and Consolidated Film Industries. The contract

had been renegotiated just before La Guardia arrived in Hollywood, with the result that Wanger “was forced to concede ultimate control to the distributor.”<sup>65</sup> What the mayor would have heard was that the banks were the villains in this story, and he would have heard it not from the head of a major Hollywood studio, but from a producer who was struggling to operate outside their grasp. Already no friend of the banking industry, La Guardia would now see these financiers, and not “Hollywood,” as the main obstacle in reviving New York’s motion picture industry.

In fact, the banks were already tightening credit for independent producers looking to work in New York—or anywhere else. American producers were accustomed to paying off their negative costs through domestic distribution and earning their profits overseas. But the international situation was becoming less stable, and the promise of overseas profits was far less secure. In 1938 Hitler had seized Austria, and he forced the Munich agreement on England and France just as *Back Door to Heaven* and . . . *one third of a nation* . . . were going before the cameras in New York. While German-controlled territories (and their skittish neighbors) were throwing up political obstacles to American films, the rest of the world had been creating increasingly restrictive tariff or quota barriers. Financiers looking at the international situation began to see foreign grosses as undependable, thus making any investment in film production that much riskier.

And more than distribution was affected, as was becoming clear in America’s largest overseas market, Great Britain (the expected source of 35 percent of an American film’s foreign income). Parliament had passed a Cinematograph Films Act in 1927, which was intended to guarantee a certain percentage of “British product” on local screens. Enterprising American producers were soon able to turn it to their own advantage by sponsoring the production of large numbers of inexpensive British “quota quickies,” which could be used to offset imports from America. By 1938, out of 103 “British” features released, 78 were financed by Americans.<sup>66</sup>

With Continental (and Asian) markets so insecure, the major American producers began to work even harder to maximize Britain’s value as their most dependable customer, especially when a new Cinematograph Films Act began to work its way through Parliament. Instead of merely sponsoring local product, MGM, Warner Bros., 20th Century-Fox, and Columbia all began their own studio operations in Britain (this is where Sam Sax was sent after Warners closed down its Vitaphone studio in Brooklyn). *Wings of the Morning*, *A Yank at Oxford*, and *Goodbye, Mr. Chips* were among the “Hollywood” films shot in these British studios in order to qualify for valuable quota credits.<sup>67</sup> The approach of war in 1939 eventually short-circuited these plans, but in 1938 the threat of wholesale Hollywood production at Denham or Teddington could not have made life any easier for the operators of Eastern Service Studios.

Perhaps the most significant problem facing the Audio Productions team when they took over the Astoria studio in 1938 was a sudden and unexpected drop in the



total number of features being made domestically. According to statistics published in the *Film Daily Yearbook*, in 1935 there were 525 feature films produced in the United States by both major studios and independents. In 1936 the total was 522, and 538 features were produced in 1937. In 1938 the number dropped 15 percent, to 455, and stayed below 500 until 1942. Frank Speidell knew that an average of 528 features had been produced domestically from 1935 to 1937, but he could not have predicted that the average would drop to 472 between 1938 and 1940, especially when theater grosses and weekly admissions totals remained relatively stable throughout this same period.<sup>68</sup> In other words, what happened beginning in 1938 was that the same number of people were going to the movies each week (good for theaters), but fewer films were needed to service this audience (very bad for someone offering a movie studio for rent).

All during 1939, ESSI continued to announce a new slate of independent productions, but every project collapsed after weeks or months of negotiation. For example, in February French producer Robert Aisner formed Heraut Films with the intention of making three or four features at Astoria. He wanted to work in the United States because of the "more expansive market" available to English-language productions, but also hoped to infuse his films with "the flavor you find in French pictures." Aisner admired the facilities in Astoria, which he found much better than the "drafty, barnlike" studios he was accustomed to using in France. He also hoped for more success in raising money in New York; in France, he said, bankers "don't consider motion picture producers seriously."<sup>69</sup> Although his production slate included such Gallic titles as Georges Simenon's *La marie du port*, his first film would be an adaptation of the decidedly American novel *Bricks without Straw* by Charles Norris. The \$300,000 production would star Sylvia Sidney and be directed by Marion Gering from a script by Irwin Shaw. Nothing more was heard of the project after Aisner returned from a brief visit to France in April.<sup>70</sup>

Frank Speidell then attempted to drum up some business locally by assembling a "Wall Street group" that offered to provide 80 percent financing for Broadway producers interested in adapting their plays to the screen. According to *Variety*, "Bankers are not interested in backing legit productions, but believe that legit showmen are qualified to transplant stage attractions to film form more effectively here than on the Coast."<sup>71</sup> The names of John Golden, Brock Pemberton, Guthrie McClintic, and many others were mentioned in this connection throughout the summer, but the only extended discussions appear to have involved the Group Theatre. The Group was said to have agreed to film three of its productions, beginning with an original project to be developed by either Irwin Shaw or Clifford Odets. "Backing for the present venture is said to be assured," and Harold Clurman had agreed that "a film director would be brought from Hollywood" to help the Group translate its ideas to the screen.<sup>72</sup> What happened next is unclear, but the Group's arrangement with ESSI dissolved before the scheduled start of shooting in October.



Another prospective tenant was Lee Garmes, who formed Academy Productions in 1939 and arranged a three-picture releasing deal with RKO. The first film, *Beyond Tomorrow*, was set to go before the cameras in Astoria that fall, but relocated to Hollywood at the last moment when the “Manhattan bank” financing the \$400,000 production suddenly withdrew. Garmes blamed the bank’s inexperience in film financing and “concern over the war’s effect on the market.” RKO was able to arrange financing from a California bank “on condition the film be made on the West Coast.”<sup>73</sup>

In fact, the start of war in Europe on September 1 proved to be the final blow, not just for the Garmes film, but for the rest of the New York motion picture industry as well. Within a few weeks the *New York Times* was reporting that the Biograph studio would close down due to “the curtailment of the activities of independent producers because of the European war and partly to a decline in the commercial film market.”<sup>74</sup> The loss of the Polish market was an obvious blow to producers like Maurice Schwartz, who was just completing *Tevya* at Biograph. But the shock was felt even in Hollywood, where producers began to second-guess the chances of every title on their production schedules. The same gossip column that announced Garmes’s readiness to sign with RKO also informed readers that Columbia was canceling production of an elaborate Jean Arthur Western, *Arizona*, because of “the reduced European market.”<sup>75</sup> *Arizona* was back on the production schedule six months later, but no one was taking any chances that fall, and especially not with the kind of independent feature the New York studios had been attracting.

### The La Guardia Project

The loss of the Fleischer cartoon operation in 1938 and the Vitaphone and Biograph studios in 1939 had reduced New York to the level of a second-rate filmmaking power. Now, even the handful of producers interested in working in Astoria were seeing their financing dry up as local banks shut off credit. On October 15, 1939, Fiorello La Guardia dedicated the new airport at North Beach (today LaGuardia Airport), a personal coup that moved the nation’s transcontinental air terminus from Newark to New York City. His administration had criss-crossed the city with new bridges and highways, and the World’s Fair in Flushing Meadows, though no moneymaker, was already regarded as a cultural landmark. So the day after he spoke at the new airport, La Guardia took on another challenge when he addressed the Society of Motion Picture Engineers, assembled at the Hotel Pennsylvania for their semi-annual convention.

With Frank Speidell at his side, La Guardia expressed himself to the participants very plainly. “I don’t want to take anything away from any other city, but I do want

to promote my own," he said. "I've noticed that most of your films are laid in a city. We have a city here. This is the art center of the world." He listed a host of advantages, from local talent and scenery to local museums and libraries (important to catch those "little historical slip-ups in the movies"). "We have everything else and more of it and I would like to see the motion picture industry return to New York, where it started." The sound engineers and laboratory technicians in attendance were not in any position to make these decisions, but La Guardia still hoped his message would get back to Hollywood. "This is not small-town talk or chamber of commerce talk—I mean it."<sup>76</sup>

Inducing a private industry to abandon even a portion of its \$112 million investment in southern California would prove far more difficult than winning federal funding for the Triboro Bridge. As George Cukor had already realized, it was not just a matter of studio facilities; thousands of artists, craftsmen, and technicians were deeply rooted in California, and few of them had any inclination to leave. "Most of the responsible producers are happily domesticated in Hollywood," Bosley Crowther reminded the readers of the *New York Times*. "They have big homes with swimming pools, they live comfortable, outdoor lives and are gladly free of the frenzy and constriction which they regard as inevitable in New York. The same goes for most of the workers in the studios. For all their minor grievances against Hollywood, they love it."<sup>77</sup>

Douglas Churchill, the *Times* correspondent in Hollywood, was more inclined to emphasize the industry's general real estate investment than any lifestyle issues. "There was a time when a bid such as that made by Manhattan's Mayor would have provoked serious discussion in Hollywood," he wrote a few weeks later.

The news created no ripple on this occasion, however. The town discovered, at the time threats were made to go to Florida during the Upton Sinclair campaign and later during the State income-tax controversy, that there is no remote chance of moving the studios. . . . Moving the studios would wreck Los Angeles and, consequently, render all of the personal [real estate] holdings [of the studio executives] valueless.<sup>78</sup>

Undeterred by arguments like these, La Guardia developed a three-pronged program to lure the motion picture industry back to New York. His first move was to meet with New York's local union representatives. Hal Mohr's experience on *Back Door to Heaven* had shown that East Coast labor costs were not necessarily any more onerous than those in California, and he had been especially impressed with the stability of the local union situation. The mayor had been told by representatives of the Central Trades and Labor Council that for five years there would be "no union trouble if the movie industry comes here," meaning no repetition of the brutal

jurisdictional battles still waging in Hollywood.<sup>79</sup> The promises carried no weight, but at least indicated that New York's politicians and labor leaders had learned a few lessons from Hollywood's painful recent labor history. And compared with the corrupt union regime of Willie Bioff and George Browne in Hollywood—which was finally coming under investigation that season—New York's union situation was straight-arrow.<sup>80</sup>

Financing was another matter. La Guardia must have been given some assurances that the Garmes debacle would not happen again, because he continued to drop hints about motion picture financing all winter. "I'm at liberty to say there is money ready and waiting for any reputable legitimate producer who decides to make a picture here," he announced in December.<sup>81</sup> A month later he was emphasizing the city's well-regulated financial market and its "businesslike" atmosphere. "There will be no extortion and unconscionable bonuses paid to any financier backing a producer."<sup>82</sup> Part of this plan seems to have involved the Empire Trust Company, which owned the recently shuttered Biograph studio and had an interest in seeing some sort of return on its investment.<sup>83</sup> La Guardia also made the revival of film production a top priority of his newly created Department of Commerce, headed by Clendenin J. Ryan Jr., who had previously served as deputy commissioner of sanitation. Ryan set up office in Rockefeller Center in space donated by Nelson Rockefeller.<sup>84</sup>

La Guardia's most controversial proposal was his suggestion that New York City itself enter the motion picture business. Following his appearance at the SMPE convention, La Guardia met for weeks with local union officials and banking interests. On November 10 he emerged from one of these meetings with a plan to construct a new "Cinema City," modeled after Radio City, on "a site near the World's Fair grounds in Flushing Meadows." The project "would involve an expenditure of \$25,000,000 a year and would provide steady jobs for 10,000 persons." The announcement of this plan was intended as a major photo opportunity, but none of the local newsreel operations was able to spare a crew to cover the story. Sal Scoppa, business representative of Local 52, interpreted this lack of coverage as a conscious snub. "This shows the length to which the Hollywood producers, who get so large a share of their revenue from moviegoers in the East, will go to defeat the Mayor's project," he told reporters.<sup>85</sup> Another union official, Charles Downs, characterized the project as the mayor's "pet baby" and noted that La Guardia "has already laid plans for the formation of a new motion picture company in New York," which would operate local studios if the Hollywood majors refused to participate. The mayor would have no "official connection" with this new company but "would act as a leader in overseeing its formation." Downs told reporters that La Guardia "was very irritated by Warner Bros. closing their studio here."<sup>86</sup>

When Hollywood offered no response, La Guardia provided more details a few

“WE HAVE A CITY HERE”

weeks later. "I've got at my disposal all the capital necessary to proceed with the building of a common central city studio," he announced. "It would be stocked with every gadget the movie people ever heard of, and it would be at the disposal of every reputable legitimate producer at extraordinarily convenient rentals. How do you like that idea?"<sup>87</sup> In retrospect, the proposed facility seems less like a conventional rental studio and more like one of the municipal markets New York had built in the 1930s to centralize the trade in meat and fish. La Guardia was the first mayor to see the motion picture industry as crucial to the economic and cultural life of the city, and not just another competing business interest. He was willing to play all his political cards, up to and including favorable tax treatment. "There will be no taxation difficulties here, because New York is not a hick town," he told a news conference. He slyly speculated that a bill then before the U.S. Senate to abolish block booking "might help to augment movie production here" and publicly denied having met with Justice Department officials in connection with their antitrust investigation of the major producers—although he did admit the idea was "being studied."<sup>88</sup>

Did the mayor really have funding for his “Cinema City”? And was the promise



Trade advertisement for the General Service Studios, sometimes known as Eastern Service Studios, a possible anchor for Fiorello La Guardia's plan to revive the motion picture industry in New York. From *Film Daily Production Guide and Director's Annual* (1936).

of “five years of labor peace” as much of a certainty as he hoped? Unfortunately, as history shows, arranging for land and labor—and even financing—has never been all it takes to generate significant amounts of film and television production in New York. In order to avoid the prospect of empty stages and unemployed workers, La Guardia began appealing directly to Hollywood producers and directors, using whatever leverage he had to entice them back to the city. He spoke to King Vidor and Ernst Lubitsch and William Dieterle, as well as to Nicholas Schenck, the powerful head of Loew’s, Inc. and MGM.<sup>89</sup> What La Guardia heard from the Hollywood directors is unknown, but Schenck was talking to reporters as soon as he left City Hall. His company had a \$20 million investment in California, and he “did not see how it could make pictures in New York at this time.”<sup>90</sup> Of course, this was not the only reason Schenck wanted things to stay put in Los Angeles.

Whatever the labor situation in New York, the producers would never land as sweet a deal as they had arranged with George Browne, president of the International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees (IATSE), and his international representative, Willie Bioff. Browne and Bioff were agents of Frank Nitti, currently running the mob in Chicago while Al Capone served time in Alcatraz. As labor racketeers, they had begun by extorting protection money from Chicago theater owner Barney Balaban in 1934, using their control of the local projectionists’ union as leverage. Schenck first met them a year later, when they threatened similar mayhem against the New York theater operations of Loew’s and RKO. For a cash payment of \$150,000, Bioff and Browne delivered a *real* guarantee of labor peace in the form of a seven-year, no-strike contract that saved the theater owners an estimated million dollars.<sup>91</sup>

Balaban, Schenck, and the rest of the movie moguls “were well aware of the character of the men they were dealing with,” notes historian Mike Nielsen. When the mob extended its interest to studio workers in Hollywood, they were not unhappy that “‘reasonable’ men who would be willing to make deals to hold down wages and prevent strikes” would be their negotiating partners.<sup>92</sup> The passage of the Wagner Act in 1935 threatened a general rise in the industry’s labor costs. But with gangsters running the unions, organized labor could be bought off. Hollywood’s labor contracts were governed by the Studio Basic Agreement of 1926, which ten years later was up for one of its periodic renewals. In a private meeting with Nicholas Schenck and Leo Spitz, head of RKO, Bioff demanded a million-dollar payoff, spread among the major and minor producers over the term of the contract. The Loew’s/MGM share was \$50,000 a year, which Schenck would deliver to Bioff and Browne in their suite at the Waldorf, in cash, in a paper bag. Another good investment, the deal saved the Hollywood studio heads \$14–15 million in wages they never had to pay and strikes they never had to battle.<sup>93</sup> So when the National Labor Relations Board authorized an election in 1939 to decide whether Hollywood’s studio workers would be represented by the IATSE or the reformist United Studio Technicians Guild,

Schenck agreed with the mobsters that the IATSE had to emerge on top. "You're damned right it must," he told Willie Bioff. "You've got to win."<sup>94</sup>

Nick's brother, Joseph Schenck, would be indicted in June 1940 for perjury and tax fraud, the perjury count stemming from his patently ridiculous explanation of a mysterious \$100,000 check he had made out to Willie Bioff. "Bioff may not have been the Schenck's third brother," as Otto Friedrich puts it, "but his version of the \$100,000 check made it sound as if they were all members of some sort of family."<sup>95</sup> This was the same Joe Schenck who had once made films with his wife, Norma Tamadge, at their studio on East 48th Street and then abandoned New York because he was tired of dealing with a parade of corrupt building inspectors and fire marshals.<sup>96</sup> Hollywood, it seems, had streamlined this activity by centralizing graft and corruption in one industrial-scale operation. The activities of Bioff and Browne are generally seen as a West Coast story. But Nick Schenck's blunt response to Fiorello La Guardia, his unwillingness even to consider making films in New York "at this time," suggests that the effects spilled over to the East Coast industry as well.

Whatever the West Coast unions may have thought, La Guardia and the New York locals agreed that about 10 percent of domestic motion picture production ought to be shot in New York.<sup>97</sup> The fastest way to reach this goal was to persuade one of the Hollywood majors to allocate a share of its activity to New York, the way Paramount had done when it operated the studio in Astoria. But the mayor abandoned this idea soon after his meeting with Schenck. By January it was being reported that La Guardia would focus on facilitating the work of independent producers and that "the city would take no direct part in the making of motion pictures," which meant the end of his "Cinema City" project.<sup>98</sup>

In fact, it was Broadway producer John Golden who gave La Guardia the best advice, suggesting a policy that prefigured the spectacular successes of the 1950s and 1960s. "Building studio buildings here won't bring the business," Golden told the mayor. "The only way to start out to get some of that business would be to begin with the playwrights, who create the ideas and are therefore the most important fellows, and the actors and actresses."<sup>99</sup> When production in New York did take off again after the war, it was not because new studios were being built, but because people like Elia Kazan, Sidney Lumet, Paddy Chayefsky, Fred Coe, George Justin, and a dozen others had ideas they wanted to film, and filmed them in New York *despite* the rundown nature of every local studio.

In 1939, however, prospective producers were interested in whatever help the city could offer. Jack Skirball had been based in the East until 1938, when he moved to California as vice president in charge of production for Grand National. He returned to New York in the summer of 1939 and formed his own production company, Knickerbocker Pictures, with theatrical attorney and manager John J. Wildberg. Perhaps enticed by Frank Speidell's "Wall Street group" of financiers, Knickerbocker announced a slate of three projects to be filmed at the Eastern



Service Studios. Dorothy Arzner was set to direct *Angela Is 22*, the adaptation of a current stage hit by the unlikely team of Sinclair Lewis and Fay Wray; Peter Arno's *Fourteen Uncles* and Ursula Parrott's *For All of Our Lives* were set to follow.<sup>100</sup> The films were said to have been budgeted at \$400,000 each, and Columbia had agreed to distribute. But by November there were rumors that *Angela* would be shot in Hollywood, and in January the entire Knickerbocker plan was "deferred."<sup>101</sup> Skirball returned to the West Coast and formed a new partnership with Frank Lloyd, producing *Saboteur* (1942) and *Shadow of a Doubt* (1943) at Universal.<sup>102</sup>

Other projects fell by the wayside with even less attention. In October 1939 the *Times* reported that Al Christie had signed to direct three films at ESSI for Monogram. He never did.<sup>103</sup> In January, Christopher Dunphy, described as both a former Paramount executive and a "former Wall Street man," announced "the formation of a finance company to produce two Class A motion pictures in a New York studio at a total cost of not less than \$600,000."<sup>104</sup> Dunphy revealed that scripts had been written, actors and directors signed; all that remained was to choose between ESSI and the Biograph studio. Nothing further was heard of this project, either. Same story with Rowland Brown's remake of *Young Man of Manhattan*, set to star Joel McCrea and Frances Dee.<sup>105</sup> A talented writer-director, Brown was even more of a trouble-making malcontent than William K. Howard and was noted for the frequency with which he had been fired by producers on two continents (*State's Attorney*, *The Scarlet Pimpernel*, *The Devil Is a Sissy*).<sup>106</sup> Apparently blacklisted in Hollywood for having slugged a producer, Brown stayed in New York and tried for a new career on Broadway, also without success.

Ben Hecht's planned return to New York, the most important project tied to the La Guardia initiative, was ultimately sabotaged at the last moment by Hollywood studio chief Harry Cohn. Still hopeful that an independent base in the East could assure him both creative independence and profit participation, Hecht formed the New York Pictures Corporation with George Jessel and announced that *Before I Die* would go into production early in 1940 with Lee Garmes behind the camera. "We will make the old Vitagraph and Astoria studios bloom again," he announced, although the production soon settled in at Biograph instead.<sup>107</sup> "The Biograph studio has received a new coat of paint," the *Times* reported, "the coal bins have been filled for the first time this year, the water has been turned on, the sprinkler system tested and the stages cleared for action."<sup>108</sup>

Hecht's financing was coming from the Guaranty Trust Company, Austrian munitions tycoon Fritz Mandl, and the Empire Trust Company (which for its share was putting up free use of the Biograph studio). Fritz Mandl, then better known in the industry as the ex-husband of actress Hedy Lamarr, had moved his operations to Argentina after a political scandal in 1937. Following the Anschluss, his Hirtenberg ammunition works were seized by the Nazis, although Mandl himself

had long since moved the bulk of his assets out of the country. Mandl arrived in New York in October 1939 on a business trip, at which point he became involved in the Hecht project through Wilmos Székeley, a "former European producer" who would have served as associate producer on the film.<sup>109</sup> Just weeks before filming was ready to start, some part of this funding collapsed, and Hecht was forced to turn to his distributor, Columbia, to take over production. Harry Cohn agreed to step in and even acceded to Hecht's demand for no studio interference—but only if the film were shot on the Columbia lot.<sup>110</sup> So Hecht and Garmes (who had seen the funding for two separate New York projects disappear in just six months) made *Angels over Broadway* on Gower Street instead of the Bronx, with Douglas Fairbanks Jr. and Rita Hayworth.<sup>111</sup>

Cohn hated the dark, Runyanesque parable Hecht and Garmes delivered, which looked too much like *The Scoundrel* and not enough like a conventional Hollywood romance. Violating his agreement, he recut the film as soon as Hecht returned to New York. William MacAdams, Hecht's biographer, reprints a press release that Hecht composed as part of his campaign to restore the film, a battle he waged in New York with Harry's brother Jack, who ran the financial end of the company. "Mr. Cohn, giddy with his artistic labors in the Blondie Series, fell upon my work with the most mysterious illiterate fever I have ever encountered in Hollywood," read the note, which Hecht prepared to send off to every drama editor in the country. "I apologize in advance for the garbled Harry Cohn version of my work with which your eyes are to be assailed shortly. If you are interested in further details of my seemingly desperate stand against Columbia's unholy sabotaging tactics I am to be reached at Nyack, New York."<sup>112</sup> Unwilling to serve as a target for Hecht's tirades, Jack Cohn threw in the towel and restored Harry's cuts. *Angels over Broadway* went out the way Hecht had intended, impressed the critics, and won an Oscar nomination for best original screenplay. But as Harry Cohn had suspected, it made no money—a misplaced "New York picture" that somehow went before the cameras on the wrong coast.<sup>113</sup>

La Guardia's plan to establish New York as an international motion picture center seems to have attracted an abundant share of European film refugees. Like Aisner and Mandl, Wilmos (William) Székeley had arrived in New York in 1939 one step ahead of the Wehrmacht, supposedly "to buy American films for French audiences." After the Hecht project collapsed, he wound up in Hollywood, where he managed to produce a screen biography of Franz Schubert, *New Wine*.<sup>114</sup> But Székeley was soon back in New York, where Artkino hired him to do a "remodeling job" on Sergei Eisenstein's *Potemkin. It Started in Odessa* was directed by Hans Burger from a script by Albert Maltz and starred Broadway headliners Henry Hull and Aline MacMahon. Using techniques pioneered a decade earlier by Bud Pollard and Joseph Seiden, the film (whose title was changed at the last moment to *Seeds of*

*Freedom*), featured Hull as a veteran of the *Potemkin* mutiny who inspires younger Russian sailors with his memories of the historic event. English dialogue dubbed over Eisenstein's footage ("Brother, this boat is heading for heavy weather!") created an effect described by historian William K. Everson as "a sad hash . . . more ludicrous than dramatic."<sup>115</sup> Projects like these offered little hope for any meaningful revival of the film industry in New York, and the West Coast studios continued to rub salt in the wound.

Union official Sal Scoppa was not the only one who noticed "the lengths to which Hollywood would go" to put New York in its place. The *New York World-Telegram* printed evidence of "the sly Hollywood campaign to disparage New York on screen," which it saw as "a result of Mayor La Guardia's effort to muscle in on the film-production racket." Close analysis of a number of Hollywood films showed that, beginning in 1940, they had begun to characterize New York as a very bad place to live or work (for some reason, all the examples were drawn from Universal productions). *Destiny*, for example, pictured "a squad of sadistic guards" jamming passengers into an IRT subway train and Ralph Morgan being "ground to salami on the tracks." When Deanna Durbin suggests to Walter Pidgeon in *It's a Date* that he leave the city for a holiday in Maine, Pidgeon shoots back, "Maine isn't far enough away from this miserable, dirty, foul city." Boris Karloff, in *Black Friday*, is unable to persuade a fellow villain to come to New York with him: "That dump is too big and noisy for me," he whines. As a final insult, the paper reported that director Tim Whelan, in a call for fifty assorted extras, had demanded of the casting office, "Make them bums. I want them to look like the people who hang around the New York Public Library."<sup>116</sup> This vision of New York was a far cry from the days when Astaire and Rogers would dance till dawn in a glittery art deco nightclub high atop Rockefeller Center. If the article was supposed to be funny, the humor was unusually dry. No one in the mayor's office was laughing.

### **"Mayor Achieves Goal"**

Hollywood's taunts may have hurt, but it was the war news that really chilled the prospects for a revival of local film production. The French military collapsed in June 1940, and by September the Luftwaffe had begun daily bombing raids on London. Watching this catastrophe from New York, La Guardia became increasingly concerned about the safety of America's urban centers, and in May 1941 he was appointed director of the Office of Civil Defense, a homeland security position that took up great amounts of his time.<sup>117</sup> A month later the German attack on the Soviet Union changed the dynamic of the war once again. Hollywood addressed these issues gingerly, if at all. But in New York the theater remained remarkably politicized, and it was Broadway that offered the mayor one final shot.

On January 21, 1939, *The American Way* began a successful run of 244 performances at the four-thousand-seat Center Theatre in Rockefeller Center. Written by George S. Kaufman and Moss Hart, the patriotic pageant covered forty years in the life of a German American family, and its most spectacular scenes filled the stage with as many as 250 extras. Fredric March played the family patriarch, who sees one son killed in the Great War and another (Whit Bissell) driven by the economic depression into the arms of the Bund. March is eventually beaten to death by Bundists while attempting to dissuade his son from signing on to their fascist agenda.<sup>118</sup> Clearly impressed by the public reaction to this tribute to Americanism, RKO paid producers Max Gordon and Harry Goetz \$250,000 for screen rights. But the subsequent failure of Gordon's 1940 screen version of *Abe Lincoln in Illinois* cooled the studio's interest in patriotic history. The property lay dormant until Goetz's new producing partner, actor-director Gregory Ratoff, revived the project in August 1941.<sup>119</sup>

"After many a false start and fizzle," the *World-Telegram* reported, "New York appeared destined today to blossom soon as a film center in full-fledged opposition to Hollywood, under the combined guidance of Mayor La Guardia and Gregory Ratoff." The Bank of America, the National Trust & Savings Association, and the Guaranty Trust Company of New York were all said to be behind the Goetz-Ratoff project, information clearly intended to separate it from previous fly-by-night schemes. The team had recently completed *The Men in Her Life* for Columbia in Hollywood and planned to transfer their operation to the Eastern Service Studios in Astoria. Here they would film not only *The American Way* (for which McKinley Kantor was said to be writing a screenplay), but also the current Broadway hit *Pal Joey* (with "a number of its New York cast," which then included sensational discovery Gene Kelly) and *No Money in Her Purse*, to star Academy Award-winner Joan Fontaine. "If fogbound, blitzbound, London can turn out a first class film like *Major Barbara*, New York is good enough for me," Ratoff told reporters.<sup>120</sup>

But headlines announcing "Mayor Achieves Goal" proved premature once again. The *Times*, quoting the less voluble Harry Goetz, found prospects merely "encouraging" and "in the conversational stage." Rights to *The American Way*, after all, were still owned by RKO.<sup>121</sup> In October Ratoff was still insisting that "only an earthquake will keep me from making pictures in New York." He had completely internalized La Guardia's arguments in the battle of New York versus Hollywood, describing as "bugaboos" all the familiar objections to New York filmmaking that had been raised over the past twenty years. "The biggest is the complaint about the lack of location sites," he claimed. "Hell, you can't make a picture in California outside a studio today. The sky is swarming with planes. What's the difference between building sets inside a studio in Hollywood and doing the same in New York?"<sup>122</sup> The only thing stopping him now, he declared, was a leftover commitment to Columbia, where *Two Yanks in Trinidad* was waiting for him.

Two months later, Ratoff was still working on *Two Yanks in Trinidad* when Japanese naval and air forces attacked American military installations in Hawaii.

### Epilogue

The twenty-year struggle to rebuild the motion picture industry in New York came to an abrupt end on December 7, 1941. A generation earlier, rationing and regulations imposed during the previous war had contributed to the shutdown of most studios in New York and New Jersey, a circumstance from which they had never fully recovered. But New York was not Chicago or Philadelphia, where flourishing motion picture industries had vanished almost overnight in response to similar social and economic upheavals. There were too many good reasons to continue making films here, and too much local talent looking for ways to justify such production. As Jesse Lasky might have put it, the corpse of New York filmmaking was not going to stay dead for long.

Lasky and Zukor had always been the most enthusiastic supporters of New York production. When World War I ended, they had assumed that postwar studio operations would more or less mirror the prewar situation, with a significant amount of production always going on close to Paramount's executive offices on Broadway. Their response had been to centralize a number of local studios and laboratories that were inefficiently scattered all over New York and New Jersey and to construct one giant facility in Astoria. The Paramount East Coast Studio would be run along the same lines as their Hollywood operation, with a large staff of actors and directors under contract, hundreds of technicians punching time clocks, and an executive staff reporting directly to the home office. But even before the building opened in 1920, it was clear that the economics of this operation had not been fully thought out. The Astoria studio did have a few good years in the 1920s, mainly as a home for those who could not or would not work for B. P. Schulberg in Hollywood. But unlike their counterparts in Hollywood, East Coast executives spent much of their time simply fighting to keep the doors open.

Fox, First National, Cosmopolitan (tied to Paramount, Goldwyn, and later MGM), Selznick, Vitagraph, Warner Bros., Pathé, and RKO Radio Pictures also made the decision to operate their own studios in New York between the two world wars (Columbia got only as far as Camden, New Jersey). But if the Astoria model did not work for Zukor and Lasky, who were willing to spend years and considerable amounts of cash to develop a "miniature Hollywood" on the Hudson, it was certainly not going to work for anyone else.

The brick-and-mortar "Hollywood studio system," with its imposing back lots and rigid creative hierarchies, was an innovative and efficient way to mass-produce

motion pictures. It had developed explosively in Fort Lee from around 1908 to 1918 and would continue to flourish in California—but only so long as the distribution network kept calling for more of the same and plenty of it. New York could never win a head-to-head competition with Hollywood in terms of manufacturing efficiency. The East Coast lost its central role in film production for the same reason it lost its lead in the printing trade and the garment business. For Paramount or Fox even to try to duplicate their West Coast operations here was, in economic terms, a simple waste of resources. Hal Mohr had the right idea when he arrived from Hollywood in 1938 to assess the potential of the local motion picture industry.<sup>123</sup> New York was "O.K." for the occasional feature, but it was not the right place to make great quantities of largely indistinguishable "bread-and butter" pictures. Indeed, despite all the low-budget industrial films, cartoons, race movies, and musical shorts produced here, New York made no serial B pictures whatsoever—no "Bowery Boys" or "Charlie Chan" films (not to mention "Tarzan" or "The Three Mesquiteers"). Mohr knew that such fodder could be turned out much more efficiently at the factory on the West Coast, where taxes, labor costs, and real estate all favored the big over the boutique.

The production in quantity of feature-length narratives remained the backbone of the American film industry, and in Hollywood each of the major studios generated an average of one feature picture every week during the height of their success. As long as this was the most efficient way to make movies, whatever was happening in New York would be little more than a sideshow. But there was still plenty of room at the margins, and for twenty years the local film industry devised ways of accommodating this activity. New York production never lacked for supporters, and the city was proposed as an antidote to Hollywood as far back as 1919, when D. W. Griffith packed up and moved to Mamaroneck. Gloria Swanson, Louise Brooks, Ben Hecht, and quite a few others were equally vocal about the advantages of East Coast production. Many more simply found it convenient and effective to work there, despite all the good reasons to join everyone else in Hollywood.

The major studios tolerated the peculiar demands of these eccentrics but failed to learn any lessons from them until it was almost too late, until it was Hollywood that was beginning to resemble an industrial ghost town. If they had paid attention, they might have understood that the traditional studio system, which had already failed in New York, would one day fail in California as well. The future lay not with Paramount's "miniature Hollywood," but with Tec-Art: a dispersed infrastructure designed to facilitate the production of *individual* features, something that Hollywood producers of Irving Thalberg's generation had worked very hard to put behind them.

Given the strength and stability of Hollywood during this period, any lessons to be learned from the way independent producers were assembling packages in New



York must have seemed largely irrelevant. And when America went to war at the end of 1941, the future of filmmaking in the East seemed darker than ever. Banks would be even less likely to underwrite the sort of productions that might naturally have been made there. Access to raw film stock would be jealously guarded, with independent producers at the end of the line, and rationing of even the most basic materials required for film production—such as nails and lumber—would once again favor the West Coast studios and their acres of standing sets. Then on January 27, 1942, the U.S. Army Signal Corps formally acquired the Astoria studio and began transforming it into a production center for training films.

Audio Productions had done very well with this studio since acquiring the lease from Western Electric four years earlier. It produced its own industrial films there, as well as those of ERPI Classroom Films and ERPI Instructional Sound Films. Paramount was still making shorts in Astoria in 1941, and *Hearst Metrotone News* and *Universal News* used the recording studios twice a week.<sup>124</sup> Fred Waller was busy directing Soundies, and Johnnie Walker and William Rowland were producing *International Forum: The Round Table of the Screen*, a motion-picture “talk show” featuring Dorothy Thompson, William L. Shirer, and other local pundits discussing such topics as “Will Democracy Survive?”<sup>125</sup> Peter J. Mooney, then serving as Audio’s assistant secretary-treasurer, remembered that the studio had actually been making money for the last two years.<sup>126</sup> But when the army moved in, what remained of this work dispersed to other local studios, all of them smaller and usually far more antiquated—a giant step backward as far as local producers were concerned.

Such a turn of events would seem to have been the final blow to Fiorello La Guardia’s dream. As the mayor shifted his attention to the national scene, the feature film industry in New York essentially went dormant for the duration.<sup>127</sup> The energy that might otherwise have been spread over a wide range of genres was now focused on one thing alone: the nonfiction output of the Signal Corps Photographic Center (SCPC).<sup>128</sup> By 1945 the center’s executive producer, Colonel Emmanuel Cohen (once head of production at Paramount), had 2,100 men and women making films for him at Astoria, 1,300 of them civilians. He noted with some pride that by its second full year of operation the center had produced 813 films (at an average length of two reels), a number that increased to 1,016 films the following year.<sup>129</sup> Three shifts a day filled the Astoria stages (tanks could maneuver on the enormous main stage), and the studio’s forty-five editing suites and twenty-four screening rooms were also operating on a round-the-clock schedule. Astoria was now the busiest motion picture studio in the world.

Of course, these statistics would all drop once the war was over, but the army continued to make films in Astoria until 1970, providing nearly thirty years of dependable employment for the members of Local 52. Moreover, the figures did not drop nearly as far, or as fast, as those documenting the collapse of the traditional Hollywood studio model. From a record ninety million paid admissions a

week in 1948, American movie attendance dropped to sixty million a week in 1950, forty million in 1958, and less than eighteen million in 1967. Part of this loss was offset by a quadrupling of ticket prices (which happened between 1948 and 1971), but gross income was still down at the box office. Receipts had managed to stay above a billion dollars annually from 1942 to 1957, but failed to reach that benchmark again until 1968, despite the skyrocketing price of a movie ticket. To put it another way: film receipts as a percentage of recreational spending fell by 87 percent between 1945 and 1969, suggesting that the prewar system was no longer capable of producing what the audience wanted to see.<sup>130</sup>

Americans still loved the movies, but they had outgrown their decades-long moviegoing habit and were now remarkably selective. The feature picture itself, once simply part of an elaborate theatrical experience that included everything from the newsreel to the decoration of the lobby, was now pretty much the whole show and needed to be treated as such—as an individual attraction, not just the centerpiece of an evening's entertainment. These changes would have happened regardless of whether or not films were being made in New York.<sup>131</sup> It was the solution to this problem—a Tec-Art solution, in which creative and financial teams could tap into an existing support system (for both production and distribution) on a per-unit basis—that New York filmmakers had been painfully working out ever since D. W. Griffith set up shop in Mamaroneck.

The U.S. Army's acquisition of the massive and well-equipped Astoria studio completely transformed the look and feel of the Signal Corps' conventional training films, as this formally posed 1942 production shot makes clear. National Archives and Records Administration photo 111-SC-148806.



On September 22, 1942, the Signal Corps staged a press event at Astoria to celebrate its acquisition of the studio.<sup>132</sup> Military men made speeches about the value of motion pictures as training tools, and a reel of Paramount clips was screened to mark the history of the place. Footage of Rudolph Valentino, Gloria Swanson, Claudette Colbert, and Noel Coward was followed by some of the army's latest training films. The juxtaposition was intended to startle, but the gap between fiction and nonfiction was about to become a lot more narrow. The army needed the talents of men like Garson Kanin, John Huston, and Stanley Cortez (all of whom worked at SCPC over the next few years) to add a Hollywood touch to training films that were notorious for putting their audiences to sleep. But the West Coast contingent also had a few things to learn. Location shooting, handheld cameras, voice-over narration, the artful manipulation of available light—all aspects of the previously scorned “newsreel style”—would begin to change the look and feel of postwar American cinema as soon as these men got back to Hollywood.

After the military speeches were over, Fiorello La Guardia got up to the microphone. Everyone knew how hard he had pushed for a revival of the film industry in New York and how unsuccessful the campaign appeared to have been. This turn of events was not exactly what he had wished for, but perhaps some good would come of it after all. “I’ve been trying to get motion pictures back in this shack for a long time now,” he reminded the crowd. He quipped that he was now more interested in “the stars you have here today”—the training film community—than those who appeared in the Paramount reel.<sup>133</sup> For the moment he was pleased to have these documentary filmmakers filling the stages, and he probably never gave the matter another thought.

In retrospect, however, it was the army's acquisition of this studio and its cultivation of the local filmmaking infrastructure that proved crucial in eventually bringing “real” movie stars back to New York. The thousands of training films made there over the next three decades did not just employ draftees and Signal Corps lifers. The bulk of these film workers were civilian actors, writers, directors, and technicians who were able to maintain crucial production skills while a new film and television industry grew up around them. The revival started at the margins, with race movies, newsreels, musical shorts, and television commercials. Then *On the Waterfront*, a spectacular rewriting of American film style, startled the industry and took home eight Oscars. Other mayors would get much of the credit for the industry's subsequent renaissance, especially John Lindsay and Ed Koch. But it was La Guardia's dream that was realized when the Astoria studio, the Fox stages, Biograph, Vitagraph, and even the old Edison studio in the Bronx once again came alive with the sights and sounds of New York filmmaking.<sup>134</sup>

# NOTES

## List of Abbreviations

<i>AFI Catalog</i>	<i>The American Film Institute Catalog of Motion Pictures Produced in the United States</i> . The first volume appeared in 1971. Because it is more easily accessed today as an online database, I have not cited specific volume and page numbers for the print edition.
<i>AC</i>	<i>American Cinematographer</i>
<i>EDR</i>	<i>Exhibitors Daily Review</i>
<i>ETR</i>	<i>Exhibitors Trade Review</i>
<i>FD</i>	<i>Film Daily</i>
<i>FDYBK</i>	<i>Film Daily Yearbook of Motion Pictures</i>
<i>JSMPE</i>	<i>Journal of the Society of Motion Picture Engineers</i>
<i>JSMPTTE</i>	<i>Journal of the Society of Motion Picture and Television Engineers</i>
<i>MPA</i>	<i>Motion Picture Almanac</i>
<i>MPD</i>	<i>Motion Picture Daily</i>
<i>MPH</i>	<i>Motion Picture Herald</i>
<i>MPN</i>	<i>Motion Picture News</i>
<i>MPW</i>	<i>Moving Picture World</i>
<i>NYDM</i>	<i>New York Dramatic Mirror</i>
<i>NYHT</i>	<i>New York Herald Tribune</i>
<i>NYT</i>	<i>New York Times</i>
<i>TSMPE</i>	<i>Transactions of the Society of Motion Picture Engineers</i>

## Introduction

1. "Para. to Close Down Eastern Lot Tuesday," *MPD*, February 24, 1932.
2. Both films were shot that summer in the Bronx Biograph studio. See "In the Mixer's Booth," *NYT*, July 8, 1934, IX 2.
3. "Motion Pictures and Finance," *Barron's*, May 19, 1924, 5.
4. The quotation is from one of the introductory titles of *A Star Is Born* (1937), David O. Selznick's gaudiest contribution to the Hollywood legend.
5. See such promotional pamphlets as *In the Valley*

*of the Cabuengas: The Story of Hollywood* (Los Angeles: Security Trust and Savings Bank, 1922).

6. Perley Poore Sheehan, *Hollywood as a World Center* (Hollywood: Hollywood Citizen's Press, 1924). Sheehan wrote the screenplays of *The Whispering Chorus* (1918) and *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (1924). His book, a mystical celebration of "the last great migration of the Aryan race," fits in well with the local fascination for "new thought," theosophy, and other popular philosophies of the era.

7. Laurance L. Hill and Silas E. Snyder, *Can Anything Good Come out of Hollywood?* (Los Angeles: Times-Mirror Press, 1923), is an extremely defensive tract that dismisses eastern critics as jealous and inaccurate. *Hollywood: Land and Legend*, by Zelda Cini and Bob Crane (Westport, CT: Arlington House, 1980), documents the history of this Hollywood myth in appropriately well-illustrated fashion.

8. Michael Webb, *Hollywood: Legend and Reality* (New York: New York Graphic Society, 1986).

9. William Fox to Sol Wurtzel, April 15, 1920, quoted in Lillian Wurtzel Semenov and Carla Winter, eds., *William Fox and Sol M. Wurtzel and the Early Fox Film Corporation* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2001), 141.

10. Rachael Low, *The History of the British Film, 1918–1927* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1971), 156 (the number cited is for films shown to the trade in 1926); Jay Leyda, *Kino* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1960), 430–32; James Hay, *Popular Film Culture in Fascist Italy* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 252; D. J. Turner, *Canadian Feature Film Index, 1913–1985* (Ottawa: Public Archives of Canada, 1987), 9.

11. *FDYBK* (1922–1923), 349; (1924), 297; (1925), 629. If one includes *Nanook of the North*, a documentary whose editing and postproduction were handled in New York, the number is even higher.

12. A standard summary is that of David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985).

13. Quoted in William Marston Seabury, *The Public and the Motion Picture Industry* (New York: Macmillan, 1926), 60.

14. For example, the Signal Corps veteran Joseph Lerner combined Hollywood production shortcuts with hand-held cameras and such innovative technology as the Reeves Magicorder, the first magnetic sound recorder used on an American feature film. See Richard Koszarski, "Joseph Lerner and the Post-War New York Film Renaissance," *Film History* 7, 4 (1995), 456–76.

15. See, for example, "Movies Come East from Hollywood," *Wall Street Journal*, April 7, 1924, 9.

### Chapter 1: New York Pioneer

1. "Sunless Temples of New York's Movies," *NYT* (book section), November 7, 1920.

2. "East Should Be Producing Center," *MPW*, April 19, 1919, 371.

3. "Sunless Temples."

4. See David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), for an account of how the producer-unit system supplanted the unit-producer system just at the time Griffith soured on Hollywood.

5. Mordaunt Hall, "Satan's Toe in the Pictures," *NYT*, February 10, 1924, IV 10. For a description of the Mamaroneck studio operation, see Richard Schickel, *D. W. Griffith: An American Life* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1984), 416ff. Working conditions, including transportation information, are in Erik Barnouw, "The Sintzenich Diaries," *Quarterly Journal of the Library of Congress* 37, nos. 3–4 (1980), 324–28.

6. Billy Bitzer remembers this space as a shooting stage; Lillian Gish refers to it as a "rehearsal space." See Billy Bitzer, *Billy Bitzer, His Story* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1973), 220; Lillian Gish, *The Movies, Mr. Griffith, and Me* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1969), 223.

7. "The D. W. Griffith Era, As Recalled by Mr. Webber," oral history transcript, n.d., Mamaroneck Public Library.

8. Schickel, *Griffith*, 420.

9. Iris Barry [and Eileen Bowser], *D. W. Griffith, American Film Master* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1965), 54. Griffith also mounted a single Robert Harron film for Metro release, *Coincidence*, which was shot in Mamaroneck in July 1920. *ETR*, July 10, 1920, 671.

10. "Lillian Gish—Director," *Silent Picture*, no. 6 (Spring 1970), 12.

11. Richard Barthelmess to Barnet Bravermann, March 30, 1945, D. W. Griffith Collection, Museum of Modern Art Film Study Center, NY.

12. Charles R. Cummings, "Visualizing the Making of the Movies," *The Vermonter* 25, nos. 11–12 ([1921]), 192–206. Cummings reports that Gish spent about twenty minutes at a stretch in the water. At other times, "her part was taken by a Miss Case, her double in general appearance, and occasionally dummies, on which hours had been spent, [which] were used for prolonged exposure or proximity to explosions."

13. *Ibid.*, 199.

14. See Edward Wagenknecht and Anthony Slide, *The Films of D. W. Griffith* (New York: Crown, 1975),

150–61, especially the lengthy account of blizzard filming at Mamaroneck.

15. Lane made his appeal to the motion picture industry at the Waldorf Astoria Hotel on January 11, 1920; Griffith was one of the speakers on the bill that day. See "Americanization Campaign under Way," *MPN*, January 24, 1920, 1032. See also Kevin Brownlow, *Behind the Mask of Innocence* (New York: Knopf, 1990), especially 452–53.

16. Leon Barsacq and Elliott Stein, *Caligari's Cabinet and Other Grand Illusions: A History of Film Design* (Boston: New York Graphic Society, 1976), 219.

17. Schickel, *Griffith*, 456.

18. *Ibid.*, 457.

19. For example, Schildkraut omits mentioning the film in his biographical entry in *Who's Who in the Theatre*, 10th ed. (London: Pitman, 1947), 1245, claiming he started in movies two years later.

20. Gish, *The Movies*, 242.

21. Barnouw, "Sintzenich Diaries," 326–27.

22. Wagenknecht and Slide, *Films of D. W. Griffith*, 188.

23. Barry and Bowser, *Griffith*, 70.

24. Quoted in Russell Merritt, "Isn't Life Wonderful," in *The Griffith Project*, vol. 10 (London: British Film Institute, 2006), 170.

25. Schickel, *Griffith*, 506.

26. "Auction at the Mamaroneck Studios of D. W. Griffith," *FD*, April 3, 1925, 11.

### Chapter 2: Paramount on Long Island

1. "Metro to Resume Production on Big Scale in the East," *MPW*, November 29, 1919, 534.

2. "Famous Players Studio Destroyed," *MPW*, September 25, 1915, 2157; "Famous Players Gets Durland Academy," *MPW*, October 9, 1915, 238; "The Famous Players Studio," *Picture Play*, November 1916, 75.

3. "Battle of Two Cities," *Photoplay*, February 1922, 42.

4. "East Is East and West Is West," *MPN*, November 8, 1919, 3467.

5. "Copperhead Entailed Care in Making," *MPN*, October 25, 1919, 3174; "The Copperhead Completed," *MPN*, December 6, 1919, 4092; "Copperhead Cost \$1000 a Day to Film," *MPN*, January 17, 1920, 867.

6. "Technical School for Studio Employees," *MPN*, October 25, 1919, 3172. Haas was one of the first production designers to win wide public acclaim; note James Hood MacFarland's praise for his use of ceilings "built to show" (twenty years before *Citizen Kane*) for *On with the Dance*, in "Architectural Problems in Motion Picture Production," *American Architect*, July 21, 1920, 65–70.

7. "Additional Studio Space Leased" and "Cast Is Set," *MPN*, November 22, 1919, 3757 and 3766.

8. "Amsterdam Opera House Now a First-Class Studio," *MPW*, February 21, 1920, 1263.

9. "Two Million Dollar Studio in Long Island City," *Queens Borough*, September–November 1919, 184.

10. Lawrence Langdon, "The Folks That Make 'em," *Photoplay Journal*, February 1921, 46.

11. "Two Million Dollar Studio," 185.

12. "View of Famous Players—Lasky Corporation's New \$2,000,000 Studio," *Queens Borough*, June–July 1919, 129.



13. "Motion Pictures Make Photographic Record of New Long Island Studio for Famous Players," *ETR*, September 4, 1920, 1555; George Folsey interviewed by Richard Koszarski, August 10, 1976.

14. "Famous Players–Lasky's New Laboratory in Long Island Ready within a Month," *ETR*, January 31, 1920, 918; "New Famous Players Laboratory Discloses Many Unusual Features," *ETR*, July 10, 1920, 668.

15. "View of Famous Players–Lasky Corporation's \$2,000,000 Studio."

16. H. A. MacNary, "Remote Control Switchboards for Motion-Picture Studios," *TSMPE*, no. 10 (May 1920), 12; "Long Island Famous Players Introduces New Mode of Arranging Electric Cables Overhead," *ETR*, June 19, 1920, 330.

17. "New Studio of Famous Players–Lasky Corp. Completed and Is Now under Full Operation," *ETR*, October 2, 1920, 1915.

18. The delay was caused not only by the electrical work but also by the reduction of the length of the main stage from the announced 260 feet to 218 feet, in order to make room for additional shop space.

19. "Arthur V. Smith of Famous Players, Planning for Equipment of L.I. Studio and Laboratory," *ETR*, June 19, 1920, 317; "Famous Players Leases Old Biograph Studios," *ETR*, July 3, 1920, 523. The three films shooting in Manhattan were *Idols of Clay* with Mae Murray, *A Romantic Adventuress* with Dorothy Dalton, and *The Frisky Mrs. Johnson* with Billie Burke. John Robertson had been sent as far away as Chicago to complete *A Dark Lantern* at the Essanay studio.

20. Later it was claimed that John Robertson's *Sentimental Tommy* was "the first company to begin work in the new building." See "Second Anniversary at Long Island Studio Celebrated by F.P.-L.," *ETR*, December 16, 1922, 123.

21. "New Studio of Famous Players–Lasky"; official opening cited in *ETR*, October 23, 1920, 2171b; "Production Activities at Famous Players New L.I. Studios Have Reached Record Point," *ETR*, November 27, 1920, 2743.

22. "Many Studio Hands to Be Laid Off," *ETR*, December 4, 1920, 10; "Paramount Stars Going to Coast; Eastern F.P.-L. Studio To Be Closed for Alterations," *ETR*, December 11, 1920, 119.

23. "Day of Wastefully Made Production Passed in Industry's Readjustment, Says Lasky," *ETR*, January 15, 1921, 667; "Scratching the Surface," *ETR*, February 5, 1921, 944.

24. "Efficiency," *Wid's Daily*, March 7, 1921, 1.

25. Costuming information from *Filmplay Journal*, August 1921; Robert E. Sherwood reports the reason for the title change in his review in *Life*, September 1921.

26. The shutdown included the Realart operation, which since October 1920 had produced thirteen of its own features at Astoria, each starring Constance Binney, Alice Brady, or Follies dancer Justine Johnstone.

27. Adolph Zukor to Jesse Lasky, July 11, 1921, Zukor Collection, Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Beverly Hills, CA. At least some box-office relief was being provided by one of their European acquisitions. "*The Golem*," he noted, "is still playing to capacity at the Criterion."

28. "Famous Players Will Close Long Island Studio," *ETR*, June 11, 1921, 107. Lasky may have been crediting the weather in California, but for an account of the industry's dismal economic situation in 1921, see the testimony of various executives in "The Coming Year" in *Wid's Year Book, 1921–1922* (New York: Wid's, 1921), 197–201.

29. Benjamin De Casseres, "Seven Months in the Movies," *NYT*, June 26, 1921, 45.

30. "East Coast Activities," *Photoplay Journal*, April 1922, 48.

31. George Folsey interviewed by Irene Kahn Atkins, April 24, 1979, collection of the Museum of the Moving Image, Astoria, NY.

32. Hank, "News from Broadway," *Camera!* March 25, 1922, 18.

33. Hank, "News from Broadway," *Camera!*, May 6, 1922, 15.

34. Even though the Astoria studio had been deserted by FP-L, the stages were never completely idle. An industrial film on *How to Prepare and Mail a Letter* was produced there in June 1921; by May of the following year, Marion Davies, Ray and Arthur Smallwood, and George Terwilliger were all reported to be working there on various projects. "Plans Film on Letter Mailing," *Wid's Daily*, June 6, 1921, 4; "Notes from Broadway," *Camera!* May 27, 1922, 5.

35. Dorothea Herzog, "Rambling through the Studios in the East," *Movie Weekly*, July 23, 1921, 8.

36. "Henabery Arrives from Coast to Direct Alice Brady," *ETR*, June 10, 1922, 81; "FP-L Eastern Studio Ready for Rush," *ETR*, August 12, 1922, 746.

37. "Last to Leave Astoria," *ETR*, April 28, 1927, 4. A complete list of Paramount's Astoria films can be found in the collections of the Museum of the Moving Image, Astoria, NY. Paramount released 268 features from all sources in the five calendar years 1923–1927; the 103 films shot in New York represent about 40 percent of its entire program for this period (the rest were West Coast films, imports, documentaries, and pickups from other producers).

38. Marie Pake, "A Day as an Extra at Famous Players Studio," *Movie Weekly*, June 4, 1921. Somewhat undecided about the actual distance to the studio, the author claims it as both "quite a distance" and a "short trip" within the space of a few lines.

39. Ethel Merman, as told to Pete Martin, *Who Could Ask for Anything More* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1955), 56–57.

40. "Scratching the Surface," *ETR*, February 5, 1921, 944; "Lasky Studio to Open January 7," *ETR*, January 5, 1924, 10.

41. "Robert T. Kane, Producer, Back from France a Hero," *MPW*, May 10, 1919, 823.

42. See the press books for these films for accounts of location shooting. Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts (hereafter Billy Rose Collection, NYPL).

43. See the production notes included in the press books for these films, Billy Rose Collection, NYPL.

44. *His Children's Children* press book, Billy Rose Collection, NYPL. The chandelier later turned up in *The Swan* and finished its days in the New York Paramount Theatre. *MPN*, December 13, 1924, 3034.



45. "Recent Developments in Producing Pictures," *NYT*, July 6, 1924. Although the *Times* credited Fischbeck with this innovation, Elliott Stein and Leon Barsacq note that it was Wilfred Buckland who had pioneered the use of arc lamps for dramatic set lighting. See *Caligari's Cabinet and Other Grand Illusions: A History of Film Design* (Boston: New York Graphic Society, 1976), 200.

46. Peter Bogdanovich, *Allan Dwan: The Last Pioneer* (New York: Praeger, 1971), 65–66.

47. Allan Dwan interviewed by Joe Adamson, September 29, 1979, collection of the Museum of the Moving Image, Astoria, NY.

48. *Ibid.*

49. Janet Staiger explains how the Hollywood producer system developed at the studios of Thomas Ince and Mack Sennett. See Staiger, "Dividing Labor for Production Control: Thomas Ince and the Rise of the Studio System," in *The American Movie Industry*, ed. Gorham Kindem (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1982), 79–93. For the role of Jews in the industry, see Neal Gabler, *An Empire of Their Own: How the Jews Invented Hollywood* (New York: Crown, 1988).

50. Dwan interviewed by Adamson.

51. *Big Brother* press book, Billy Rose Collection, NYPL.

52. Bogdanovich, *Allan Dwan*, 76; *Night Life of New York* press book, Billy Rose Collection, NYPL; *ETR*, April 18, 1925, 46.

53. Joe Pasternak, *Easy the Hard Way* (New York: Putnam's, 1956), 66.

54. Dwan interviewed by Adamson. Pasternak, in his autobiography (*Easy the Hard Way*, 88), claims that Dwan never told him why he was summarily fired. Studio projectionist Rudy Koubek, in an interview with the author, claimed that one reason Pasternak advanced at the studio in the first place was because he could speak to Zukor in Hungarian.

55. Gloria Swanson, *Swanson on Swanson* (New York: Random House, 1980), 192–93, 201–2.

56. *Ibid.*, 199, 271.

57. "Kenneth Webb Has Moved to Great Neck," *MPN*, December 27, 1924, 3279.

58. "Battle of Two Cities," 45.

59. *Ibid.*, 100.

60. "Allan Dwan . . . Looking over the *Zaza* Love Nest" (photo caption), *ETR*, July 7, 1923, 230; see also the *Zaza* press book, Billy Rose Collection, NYPL.

61. Swanson, *Swanson on Swanson*, 196.

62. "Zaza," *Motion Picture Classic*, December 1923; "Zaza," *Photoplay*, December 1923.

63. "Where Screen Gowns Go," *NYT*, January 13, 1924, X 5; "Costume Director Tells of Clothing Characters," *NYT*, January 10, 1926, X 5. Smith had previously been associated with the New York couturier Lady Duff-Gordon (Lucile).

64. "Old Lady Astor Says," *ETR*, August 9, 1924, 34.

65. *MPN*, December 29, 1923, 3046; "The Humming Bird," *Cinema Art*, March 1924.

66. *The Humming Bird* press book, Billy Rose Collection, NYPL.

67. Swanson, *Swanson on Swanson*, 198, 219. See also "Old Lady Astor Says," *ETR*, February 16, 1924, 4,

where Swanson and Betty Compson are said to be up for the role.

68. Swanson, *Swanson on Swanson*, 211.

69. Bogdanovich, *Allan Dwan*, 70–75.

70. Souvenir program, *Madame Sans-Gêne*. Menestier's name is given as Harry Menestier; he was a favorite of Americans working in France during the 1920s and designed films there for Pearl White and Rex Ingram.

71. Pasternak, *Easy the Hard Way*, 82–83.

72. Bogdanovich, *Allan Dwan*, 78–79; *Stage Struck* press book, Billy Rose Collection, NYPL.

73. Swanson, *Swanson on Swanson*, 263–74.

74. *Ibid.*, 279–81; "Gloria Swanson a Director," *EDR*, May 7, 1926, 3.

75. Quoted in Irving Shulman, *Valentino* (New York: Pocket Books, 1968), 169.

76. Michael Morris, *Madame Valentino* (New York: Abbeville, 1991), 135.

77. "Monsieur Beaucaire Starts Auspiciously," *ETR*, February 23, 1924, 38.

78. "Complete Preparations for Valentino Picture," *ETR*, February 2, 1924, 13.

79. See Dorothy Herzog, *Movie Weekly*, May 31, 1924; also "Monsieur Beaucaire Starts Auspiciously."

80. Frank Nelson to Judd Tully, June 28, 1979, collection of the Museum of the Moving Image, Astoria, NY.

81. Bebe Daniels and Ben Lyon, *Life with the Lyons* (London: Odhams Press, 1953), 108.

82. *New York Post*, June 20, 1924, *Sainted Devil* clipping file, Billy Rose Collection, NYPL.

83. Shulman, *Valentino*, 214–26.

84. Swanson, *Swanson on Swanson*, 169–74.

85. "Wanger Back from London," *FD*, July 25, 1924, 1. For an overview of Wanger's career, see Matthew Bernstein, *Walter Wanger, Hollywood Independent* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).

86. Jesse Lasky, *I Blow My Own Horn* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1957), 196.

87. Le Baron's credit on *Manhandled* was "supervising editor"; after Wanger's arrival, he would be called "editor-in-chief of production" or "associate producer" of the Long Island studio. The title "supervising editor," used frequently in the 1920s, was borrowed from the publishing business and had nothing to do with cutting film.

88. Louise Brooks interviewed by Richard and Diane Koszarski, June 3, 1979, collection of the Museum of the Moving Image, Astoria, NY.

89. Walter Wanger, quoted in Bernard Rosenberg and Harry Silverstein, *The Real Tinsel* (New York: Macmillan, 1970), 83.

90. J. B. Kaufman, "Fascinating Youth: The Story of the Paramount Pictures School," *Film History* 4, no. 2 (1990), 131.

91. "Paramount to Drop School for Acting," *EDR*, October 29, 1926, 1.

92. "Glenn Hunter Picture to Be Called *Cradle Buster*," *Camera!* February 4, 1922, 8; Frank Wright Tuttle, "Capturing Young America for the Screen," *Filmplay Journal*, April 1922, 8.

93. "An All College Film Company," *Photoplay*, September 1922, 46.

94. Fred Waller became head of special effects and

later a director of Paramount's musical shorts. Glenn Hunter starred in *West of the Water Tower* (1924) before moving to Hollywood. Townsend Martin, in addition to the films he would write for Tuttle, also worked on *A Kiss for Cinderella* (1926).

95. "Four New Directors for Famous Players," *ETR*, April 12, 1924, 13.

96. *The Manicure Girl* press book, Billy Rose Collection, NYPL.

97. Frank Tuttle, *They Started Talking* (Albany, GA: BearManor Media, 2005), 51.

98. Tuttle does not merit a single line in such comprehensive studies as Andrew Sarris's *The American Cinema: Directors and Directions, 1929–1968* (New York: Dutton, 1968) or John Wakeman's encyclopedic *World Film Directors*, 2 vols. (New York: H. W. Wilson, 1987–1988).

99. Swanson, *Swanson on Swanson*, 280; Daniels and Lyon, *Life with the Lyons*.

100. The arrival of this group of directors was a real generational break. On average, they were fifteen years younger than such established directors as Dwan, Griffith, and Herbert Brenon, who were also working at the studio in the mid-1920s.

101. Barry Paris, *Louise Brooks* (New York: Knopf, 1989), 96.

102. When Zelda Sayre came to New York to marry Scott Fitzgerald in 1920, he had her replace her unstylish wardrobe with something from Jean Patou. "The thing was to look like Justine Johnstone at the time," Zelda wrote, "and it still seems a fine way to have looked." Quoted in Arthur Mizener, *The Far Side of Paradise* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1949), 108.

103. Other Broadway dancers who worked at Astoria in the silent period included Michio Ito (*Dawn of the East*, 1921), Dorothy Dickson (*Paying the Piper*, 1921), and Gilda Gray (*Lawful Larceny*, 1923).

104. Brooks interviewed by Richard and Diane Koszarski.

105. Lois Moran and Buster Collier were also scheduled to appear in this first attempt at *Glorifying the American Girl*, with Eddie Sutherland directing. "In Eastern Studios," *EDR*, May 16, 1926.

106. "Along Film Row," *EDR*, June 18, 1926, 2.

107. Kenneth Tynan, "The Girl in the Black Helmet," *The New Yorker*, June 11, 1979, 47.

108. See the press books for these films (Billy Rose Collection, NYPL) for reference to their use of Florida locations.

109. Brooks interviewed by Richard and Diane Koszarski.

110. For an extended analysis of how Fields shaped his Astoria films out of these routines, see Simon Louvish, *The Man on the Flying Trapeze* (London: Faber and Faber, 1997), 269–84.

111. *Ibid.*, 260.

112. Richard Schickel, *D. W. Griffith: An American Life* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1984), 329.

113. Brooks interviewed by Richard and Diane Koszarski.

114. Ed Flaherty interviewed by Sam Robert, October 26, 1963, collection of the Museum of the Moving Image, Astoria, NY. Cameraman Hal Sintzenich's diary accounts of working on these films are discussed in

J. B. Kaufman, "It Was Always Funny Working with Fields," *Griffithiana* 62–63 (May 1998), 39–79 (but note corrections in the subsequent issue).

115. Robert Lewis Taylor, *W. C. Fields: His Follies and Fortunes* (New York: Signet, 1968), 162–64.

116. James Sibley Watson Jr., "The Films of J. S. Watson Jr. and Melville Webber: Some Retrospective Views," *University of Rochester Library Bulletin* 28, no. 2 (Winter 1975), available at <http://www.lib.rochester.edu/index.cfm?PAGE=3507>. "Had I been an admirer of Griffith's films, no doubt I would have behaved differently," Watson recalled. "But for me, at that time, the only 'Emperor' was Murnau, the director of *The Last Laugh*." Watson would soon turn his interest in camera technology to the production of his own short avant-garde films, *The Fall of the House of Usher* (1928) and *Lot in Sodom* (1933).

117. Brooks interviewed by Richard and Diane Koszarski.

118. Schickel, *D. W. Griffith*, 514.

119. *The Man Who Invented Hollywood: The Autobiography of D. W. Griffith*, ed. James Hart (Louisville, KY: Touchstone, 1972), 55.

120. Robert Cobaugh, "W. C. Fields Flick Revives Golden Era," *Bayside Times*, October 7, 1971, 18. Scenes showing construction of a housing development were shot nearby at the Russell Gardens development in Great Neck. See "Great Neck in Movies: A Griffith Picture," *Great Neck News*, May 23, 1925.

121. *That "Royle" Girl* press book, Billy Rose Collection, NYPL.

122. Adolphe Menjou, *It Took Nine Tailors* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1948), 176.

123. Quoted in Schickel, *D. W. Griffith*, 520–23.

124. "Griffith and Famous at Parting of Ways," *EDR*, October 27, 1926, 1.

125. "Minority Patrons Must Be Satisfied," *ETR*, March 8, 1924, 13.

126. See Jack Lodge, "The Career of Herbert Brenon," *Griffithiana* 57–58 (October 1996).

127. An interesting account of Brenon's work on the editing of *God Gave Me Twenty Cents* appears in "Watching a Director Title and Cut a Film," *NYT*, November 7, 1926, X 6.

128. Brooks interviewed by Richard and Diane Koszarski.

129. *The Song and Dance Man* press book, Billy Rose Collection, NYPL.

130. William K. Everson, *American Silent Film* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 294–95.

131. Waller's technical work on this and other Astoria films is discussed in "Visit to a Screen Wizard's Workshop," *NYT*, February 13, 1927, VII 7.

132. Lasky, *I Blow My Own Horn*, 196.

133. *Ibid.*, 195.

134. *Ibid.*, 196. This impression seems to have been common around the studio. As Louise Brooks told this author, "They closed the studio . . . because they had a fight over *Beau Geste*." Brooks interviewed by Richard and Diane Koszarski.

135. "Paramount Studio to Close Permanently," *Queens Boro*, December 1926, 703.

136. "William Le Baron Signs New Five-Year Contract," *EDR*, September 30, 1926, 4; "Assistant to Le

Baron," *EDR*, May 23, 1927, 1. The latter article indicates that Le Baron had already been appointed to a similar position with Joseph P. Kennedy's Film Booking Office of Ameica and that many of his old staff members were joining him.

137. "Last to Leave Astoria," *EDR*, April 28, 1927, 4.

138. "Ralph Block Now on Coast," *EDR*, March 30, 1927, 1; "Hitt Made Art Director for Famous on Coast," *EDR*, April 2, 1927, 1; "Assistant to Le Baron," *EDR*, May 23, 1927, 1.

### Chapter 3: Freelance Filmmaking

1. "Famous to Quit East around April First," *EDR*, March 5, 1927, 1.

2. "Something to Worry About—Studio Idle at \$1,000 a Day!" *EDR*, April 7, 1927, 1.

3. Charles Phelps Cushing, "Types Street," *Picture Play*, February 1917, 194.

4. "Film Players to Ask Closed Shop," *MPW*, September 20, 1919, 1776; "Extras Bait Federation Woman Organizer," *MPW*, November 8, 1919, 230; Murray Ross, *Stars and Strikes: Unionization of Hollywood* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1941), 23–30; Michael Nielsen, "Labor Power and Organization in the Early U.S. Motion Picture Industry," *Film History* 2, no. 2 (1988), 121–31.

5. Bill "Dad" Nallin interviewed by Sam Robert, 1965, collection of the Museum of the Moving Image, Astoria, NY.

6. Allan Dwan interviewed by Joe Adamson, September 29, 1979, collection of the Museum of the Moving Image, Astoria, NY.

7. "A Half Century of Loyalty, Progress, Artistry," *AC*, January 1969, 46.

8. *ETR*, December 11, 1920, 167.

9. A copy of the original handwritten charter is in the J. Searle Dawley Collection, Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Beverly Hills, CA.

10. *Wid's Yearbook* (1921), 281; *FDYBK* (1926), 287; Dawley Collection.

11. Sam Robert, "The New York Studio Mechanics," *I.A.T.S.E. Official Bulletin*, Spring 1963, 18. Some of these workers were already members of United Scenic Artists Local 829, organized in 1918, but this was not primarily a motion picture union ("Guilds and Unions," *MPA* [1945–46], 716–29). During this same period the craft unions in Hollywood were riven by internal disputes, which were not settled until two years after Local 52 was given jurisdiction over production in New York. Organized labor in Los Angeles finally achieved the so-called Studio Basic Agreement on November 29, 1926 (Ross, *Stars and Strikes*, 12–15).

12. Arthur Scanlon interviewed by Sam Robert, n.d., collection of the Museum of the Moving Image, Astoria, NY.

13. "Paramount Studio to Close Permanently," *Queensboro*, December 1926, 703; Jesse Lasky, *I Blow My Own Horn* (London: Gollcanz, 1957), 194.

14. Richard Koszarski, *An Evening's Entertainment: The Age of the Silent Feature Picture, 1915–1928* (New York: Scribners, 1990), 72–75.

15. "Authors of Constance Talmadge Stories Get New Equipment," *MPN*, November 1, 1919, 3296.

16. "Battle of Two Cities," *Photoplay*, February 1922, 101.

17. For example, see the two-page advertisement for their film *A Virtuous Vamp* in *MPN*, November 8, 1919, 3402–3, in which their credit is enormous and director Kirkland's is negligible by comparison. Loos later published most of the screenplay of *A Virtuous Vamp* in *The Talmadge Girls: A Memoir* (New York: Viking, 1978), 138–204.

18. Loos, *Talmadge Girls*, 48.

19. "Joe Schenck Has Leased the Oliver Studio," *ETR*, September 18, 1920, 1746; Sigmund Meyerson interviewed by Sam Robert, October 21, 1963, collection of the Museum of the Moving Image, Astoria, NY. See also "To Transform Brewery into Studio," *MPW*, June 9, 1917, 1616.

20. This was Mannix's first motion picture job. He had worked his way up from day laborer to general manager of Palisades Park when it was operated by the Schenck brothers. He would later have an important career as one of Louis B. Mayer's chief lieutenants at MGM.

21. Robert E. Sherwood, *The Best Moving Pictures of 1922–23* (Boston: Small, Maynard, 1923), 25. But see also Greta de Groat, "Rediscovering Norma Talmadge," *Griffithiana* 71 (2001), 83–109, for a more supportive evaluation.

22. Loos, *Talmadge Girls*, 43, 47.

23. Meyerson interviewed by Robert.

24. See Joseph Lerner's account of the procedure for paying off police officials in Richard Koszarski, "Joseph Lerner and the Post-War New York Film Renaissance," *Film History* 7, no. 4 (1995), 472.

25. Terry Ramsaye, *A Million and One Nights* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1926), 767–73.

26. "Selznick Pictures Takes Part of Biograph Studio," *MPW*, May 19, 1919, 793.

27. Raymond Fielding, *The American Newsreel* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1972), 83–84.

28. "Selznick to Distribute Prizma Pictures, to Produce Five-Reel Dramas in Color," *MPW*, March 27, 1920, 2168. Although several titles were announced, Selznick made no Prizmacolor features.

29. "Selznick Pictures Building in Long Island City," *Queens Boro*, September–November 1919, 186.

30. "California Gets Another Rude Blow," *MPW*, April 26, 1919, 521.

31. "Selznick Pictures Building in Long Island City." Selznick later did shoot the "Arabian" scenes for *The Man of Stone* at Tangier, Long Island, what is today Mastic Beach. "Arabia Has Moved to Long Island," *Movie Weekly*, September 3, 1921, 25. But filming desert scenes on Long Island was not always so simple. According to "Williams Goes Back to Coast," *MPN*, January 31, 1920, 1266, Vitagraph had to cancel its plans to film "torrid desert scenes" for *Capt. Swift* "on the waste and sandy shores of Long Island between Amagansett and Montauk Point" when it proved too cold to work there. Unfortunately, there is no truth to the persistent urban legend that Rudolph Valentino filmed desert sequences of *The Sheik* (1921) at Montauk Point, as reported, for example, in Betty Kane Weigand, "Valentino Still Makes 'em Swoon in Blue Point," *Suffolk County News*, December 1, 1983, 2.

32. "Battle of Two Cities," 45.
33. A set of these blueprints, dated 1920, was offered for sale in 1997 by a rare book dealer, xerxes books, of Glen Head, NY, and described in its Internet posting. See also "Selznick Pictures Building in Long Island City."
34. "Selznick Aiming for Leadership," *MPN*, January 31, 1920, 1279.
35. For Selznick's plans on closing down his West Coast operation, see *ETR*, June 12, 1920, 153, and June 19, 1920, 262.
36. "Style and Class," *The Brain Exchange*, July 4, 1921, 4.
37. Selznick did make some use of Broadway choruses. According to the *AFI Catalog*, *The Broken Melody* (1919) featured the chorus of *Hitchy-Koo*, then appearing at the Liberty Theatre, and *Footlights and Shadows* (1920) used the chorus from the *Greenwich Village Follies*.
38. "Studios Busy," *The Brain Exchange*, June 27, 1921, 3.
39. See entries for *A Country Cousin*, *A Fool and His Money*, and *Whispers* in *AFI Catalog*. *ETR*, November 6, 1920, 2448, reports on Selznick's filming of *Soul and Body*, although the title was changed on release.
40. See *AFI Catalog* entry for *Piccadilly Jim*. *ETR*, September 18, 1920, reports Selznick's work on *We the People*, but the film was apparently released under a different title.
41. "Selznick Buys . . .," *ETR*, October 9, 1920, 1994f.
42. Barry Salt, "Ralph Ince, un fratello 'minore'?" in *Vitagraph Co. of America, Il cinema prima di Hollywood*, ed. Paolo Cherchi Usai (Pordenone: Edizioni Studio Tesi, 1987), 387.
43. For a discussion of Selznick, World, and the significance of the many French directors working in Fort Lee during the 1910s, see Kevin Lewis, "A World across from Broadway," *Film History* 1, no. 1 (1987), 39–52.
44. For some of these rumors, see Kenneth Anger, *Hollywood Babylon* (San Francisco: Straight Arrow, 1975), 14–19.
45. Ron Haver, *David O. Selznick's Hollywood* (New York: Knopf, 1980).
46. Quoted in Haver, *Selznick's Hollywood*, 176.
47. Dorothea Herzog, "Rambling through the Studios in the East," *Movie Weekly*, November 19, 1921, 8.
48. "Star Salaries," *FDYBK* (1924), 299. This ranking omitted the United Artists partners Chaplin, Fairbanks, and Pickford.
49. "Whitman Bennett," *FD*, June 27, 1926.
50. "Dyreda–New Producing Company," *MPW*, October 3, 1914, 69, claims that the studio was constructed "under the supervision of D. W. Griffith," although Griffith apparently never worked there.
51. "Bennett Buys Studio," *FD*, March 25, 1921, 1. The "Whitman Bennett Studios" trade ad in the 1925 *FDYBK*, 244, lists telephone numbers for both Yonkers and Kingsbridge.
52. Barrymore's New York features are not even mentioned in his autobiography, although he does admit to appearing in a few Griffith Biograph shorts in 1912. Lionel Barrymore, as told to Cameron Schipp, *We Barrymores* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1951).
53. "Making a Motion Picture Producer," *Film Play Journal*, July 1922, 36. See also "Enter Whitman Bennett as a Producing Manager," *MPW*, May 8, 1920, 805.
54. Whitman Bennett to Lee Shubert, January 19, 1921, Correspondence File 318, Shubert Archives, Lyceum Theatre, New York City.
55. "Bennett Buys Studio"; "Bennett Makes Special Series," *MPW*, September 4, 1920, 58.
56. *FD*, July 17, 1924.
57. *FD*, May 29, 1925.
58. "This Is the Whitman Bennett Studio," *FDYBK* (1926), 364.
59. "In Eastern Studios," *FD*, October 4, 1925.
60. "Sportland," *Long Island Daily Press*, September 10, 1933. At that time the building address was given as 88-43 Myrtle Avenue.
61. "Our Neighborhood the Way It Was," *Ridgewood [NY] Times*, January 19, 1984, 15.
62. "Mirror Films Has Studio," *MPW*, October 23, 1915, 590.
63. "Activities at Glendale," *MPW*, September 1, 1917, 1361; "Busy at Glendale Studio," *MPW*, October 6, 1917, 100.
64. "Extras Injured When Balcony Falls," *MPW*, December 6, 1919, 690; *Camera!* January 14 and April 22, 1922.
65. For example, *MPN*, May 8, 1920, 4016, says *A Knight for a Knight* (released as *Torchy's Knight Hood* [1921]) is the second "Torchy" comedy to be shot at the Leah Baird studio in Cliffside Park (the old Kalem studio on Palisade Avenue). A few months later "Burr Takes over Claremont Studio," *MPW*, November 27, 1920, 490, says he will move to this Bronx studio after having made the previous three "Torchys" at the Hal Benedict studio in College Point. Then, on March 26, 1921, *Wid's Daily* reported (p. 4) that Master Films had leased 54th Street for the "Torchy" series.
66. *MPN*, December 1, 1923, 2584.
67. There is an excellent La Cava filmography in Tony Partearroyo, ed., *Gregory La Cava* (Madrid: Filmoteca Espanola, 1995).
68. *Wid's Daily*, May 21, 1921, 4.
69. Partearroyo, ed., *Gregory La Cava*, 246. *The New School Teacher* was not La Cava's first "Chic" Sale film. In March 1920 Sale had made a film for Christie on the West Coast, *The Smart Aleck*, which proved unreleasable. About fifteen months later, while La Cava was still working on the Torchy comedies for C. C. Burr, he directed *His Nibs* (1921), a salvage operation designed to use as much footage as possible from the aborted *Smart Aleck* production. In this version, a rustic movie house called the Slippery Elm Picture Palace is showing a film called *He Fooled 'em All* (actually a condensed version of *The Smart Aleck*). Not only does Sale appear as an actor in the original film, he also plays all the characters in the frame story, including the theater manager, the local newspaper editor, and the girl at the piano. As the projectionist, he offers the audience a running commentary on his own film. The was La Cava's first live-action directing credit, although the idea for this self-referential critique probably came from writer Arthur Hoerl. It is unclear what studio facilities La Cava used to shoot the frame story.
70. Canadian filmmaker Ernest Shipman organized



the Long Island Film Company to make films that would take advantage of the region's seacoast, high society life, and rural landscape, but it is unknown if *The River Road* was ever completed. See *FD*, "Long Island Film," May 4, 1923, 1, and "East Becomes Active," May 19, 1924, 1. The Nungesser film, which also shot at Roosevelt and Curtis Flying Fields, was produced under the title *The Great Air Mail Mystery*; *MPN*, December 20, 1924, 3164a.

71. Tec-Art Studios trade ad, *FDYBK* (1926), opposite page 1. *Rainbow Riley*, a remake of *The Cub* (1915), used location scenes at Dingman's Falls, PA, the Delaware Water Gap, and Ft. Myers, VA. *Rainbow Riley* press book, Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts (hereafter Billy Rose Collection, NYPL).

72. "Tilford Cinema Methods," *Wid's Yearbook* (1921), 84.

73. Scott Jameson, "Making Pictures of the Old Masters," *Movie Weekly*, November 5, 1921, 4; D. J. Turner, "Lejaren à Hiller and the Cinema," *Film History* 19, no. 4 (2007), 302–18.

74. "Leonard at Work," *FD*, June 7, 1921, 4.

75. *Camera!* September 30, 1922.

76. T. Howard Kelly, "New Picture Invention Gives Uncanny Realism," *Movie Weekly*, November 11, 1922, 4–5, 31.

77. "The Screen," *NYT*, December 28, 1922, 24.

78. Review quoted in a Teleview display ad, *NYT*, December 29, 1922, 20.

79. "Pioneer Days in Colour Motion Pictures with William T. Crespinel," *Film History* 12, no. 1 (2000), 65–66.

80. Tec-Art Studios trade ad, *FDYBK* (1922–1923), n.p.

81. Dorothea Herzog, "Laughing through Sleepy Hollow with Will Rogers," *Movie Weekly*, August 19, 1922, 15.

82. C. E. K. Mees, "History of Professional Black-and-White Motion-Picture Film," *JSMPT* (October 1954), 134; Barry Salt, *Film Style and Technology* (London: Starword, 1992), 148. Salt suggests the film was even financed by Eastman.

83. *FD*, July 24, 1924, 1. The Jackson studio had opened on April 10, 1921, and had five stages totaling 16,000 square feet, with space for fifty dressing rooms and offices. *Wid's Daily*, March 14, 1921, 2.

84. Advertisement, *FDYBK* (1926), opposite page 1.

85. Tec-Art staff list in *FDYBK* (1926), 705; Albert D'Agostino biography in Leon Barsacq and Elliott Stein, *Caligari's Cabinet and Other Grand Illusions: A History of Film Design* (Boston: New York Graphic Society, 1976), 203.

86. Information from Borough of Queens Building Department records, block 916, lot 5.

87. "New Motion Picture Studio to Let," *MPN*, May 1, 1920, 3671; "New Studio for Rent," *ETR*, October 23, 1920, 2239. The studio may originally have been connected to the Goldwyn Pictures Corporation, which was a partner in the Capitol Theatre and whose eastern production manager, George Mooser, was listed as rental agent in the October 23 announcement.

88. *ETR*, October 9, 1920, 2046; "Vivian Martin Pictures Sued for Studio Rent," *MPW*, July 9, 1921, 215.

89. "Leases New Studio," *Wid's Daily*, June 7, 1921, 1.

90. Steve Jones interviewed by Sam Robert, June 24, 1973, collection of the Museum of the Moving Image, Astoria, NY.

91. "Violet Hemming Returns in *Desert Love*," *Movie Weekly*, September 30, 1922, 15. Pyramid's other films included *When the Desert Calls* and *What Fools Men Are* (both 1922).

92. Dorothea Herzog, "Rambling through the Studios in the East," *Movie Weekly*, June 3, 1922, 15.

93. David Stenn, *Clara Bow: Running Wild* (New York: Penguin, 1990), 28; "Start *The Puritans* Today," *FD*, February 25, 1924, 2; "Chadwick Rushing Studio Work," *ETR*, January 31, 1925, 26; "In Eastern Studios," *FD*, October 4 and November 8, 1925, April 4 and April 18, 1926; Kalton Lahue, *Continued Next Week* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1964), 125–26.

94. "Charlie Bowers Comedies," *Queens Boro*, August 1926, 484. Bowers's removal to the West Coast was reported in *MPW* on October 29, 1927, "Bowers Installs Machinery for His New Educational Novelties."

95. For one scene in *He Done His Best* (1926), Bowers uses the entrance of the studio itself for a location, with the "109" address prominently featured.

96. "Selznick Leases Great Biograph Studio," *MPW*, November 11, 1916, 871; "Little Journeys to Eastern Studios III: Biograph," *NYDM*, July 28, 1917, 11.

97. See Biograph studio listings in *Camera!* February 4, April 22, May 6, and May 20, 1922. *Broadway Rose* and *Fascination* appear to have been the Murray films in production.

98. Dorothea Herzog, "Rambling through the Studios in the East," *Movie Weekly*, September 17, 1921, 8, and June 24, 1922, 15.

99. Alison Smith, "Little Journeys to Eastern Studios IV—Goldwyn," *NYDM*, August 4, 1917, 11; "Goldwyn Purchases Triangle Studios," *MPW*, June 7, 1919, 1470 (Goldwyn had been renting the Culver City studio since November 1918). See also Richard Koszarski, *Fort Lee: The Film Town* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004), 286–311.

100. "Goldwyn Adds New Studios in East," *Exhibitors Herald and Motography*, August 16, 1919, 37.

101. A. Scott Berg, *Goldwyn: A Biography* (New York: Knopf, 1989), 90–91; "Goldwyn's New York Films to Be Made at Erbograph," *MPW*, December 27, 1919, 1112. Erbograph was mainly a laboratory operation, although Ludwig G. B. Erb did rent space to independents like the Lee Sisters, who made a series of shorts there in 1919. "Jane and Katherine Lee Enter Production Field," *MPW*, June 28, 1919, 1956.

102. "Goldwyn Soon Producing in East," *MPN*, November 15, 1919, 3613; "Madge Kennedy Starts Work in East," *MPN*, January 31, 1920, 1288.

103. "Goldwyn Takes Another Studio to Hurry Production on Madge Kennedy's Vehicle," *MPW*, July 31, 1920, 616.

104. "Goldwyn Will Build Studios in the East," *MPW*, August 16, 1919, 969.

105. Josef von Sternberg, *Fun in a Chinese Laundry* (New York: Macmillan, 1965), 317. Von Sternberg is credited as assistant director on *The Highest Bidder*, directed by Wallace Worsley. If he worked uncredited on one of the two films Windom made for Goldwyn, it

must have been another Madge Kennedy picture, either *The Girl with the Jazz Heart* or *The Truth*.

106. Berg, *Goldwyn*, 99–101.

107. "Picture Plays and People," *NYT*, May 20, 1923, X 2. According to another source, Goldwyn also shot the non-Italian portions of *The Eternal City* (1923) in New York. R. Dixon Smith, *Ronald Colman, Gentleman of the Cinema* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1991), 24–25.

108. "Fine Cast for Experience," *MPN*, February 26, 1921, 1661.

109. Richard Barthelmess to Barnett Bravermann, March 30, 1945, D. W. Griffith Collection, Department of Film and Video, Museum of Modern Art, NY.

110. Henry King, *Director: From Silents to Scope* (Los Angeles: Directors Guild of America, 1995), 43–44.

111. For example, in his essay on Barthelmess's career, David Shipman dismisses everything Barthelmess made in New York after *Tol'able David* as "this run of mediocre films." *The Great Movie Stars: The Golden Years* (New York: Bonanza, 1970), 47.

112. Harold R. Hall, "Biograph: The Magic Name of the Movies," *Motion Picture Classic* (June 1927), 59; Kevin Brownlow, *The Parade's Gone By . . .* (New York: Knopf, 1968), 106.

113. Quoted in David Robinson, "The Enduring Craft of Henry King," *The Movie*, no. 115 (London, 1982), 2287. See also V. I. Pudovkin, *Film Technique and Film Acting* (New York: Grove Press, 1960), 54–57, 124–25.

114. Brownlow, *Parade's Gone By*, 108.

115. Henry King, *Director*, 45.

116. *Ibid.*, 58.

117. "The Art of Everett Shinn," *MPW*, December 1, 1917, 1302. *The Bright Shawl*, long unavailable for study, has been restored by the UCLA Film and Television Archives, probably because its supporting cast is dotted with such future celebrities as William Powell, Mary Astor, and (in his only silent film) Edward G. Robinson.

118. Ihnen delivered an interesting paper to the Society of Motion Picture Engineers at their May 1925 meeting in Schenectady, NY, in which he described painting highlights on his sets with buckets of white paint, something he had to do because he had constructed these sets with full ceilings. The published paper was illustrated with scenes from *The Fighting Blade* and such other New York films as *Isn't Life Wonderful* and *Night Life of New York*. Wiard B. Ihnen and D. W. Atwater, "Artistic Utilization of Light in Motion Picture Photography," *TSMPE*, no. 21 (May 1925), 21–37.

119. *The Enchanted Cottage* press book, Billy Rose Collection, NYPL. See Ihnen and Atwater, "Artistic Utilization of Light," for information on filming of *The Fighting Blade*.

120. Koszarski, *Fort Lee*, 282.

121. *Classmates* press book, Billy Rose Collection, NYPL.

122. *The Beautiful City* press book, Billy Rose Collection, NYPL.

123. "Barthelmess a F-N Star," *First National News*, March 1, 1926, 4.

124. *ETR*, October 23, 1920, 2351. The film was probably made at the Solax studio.

125. "Novel Photographic Effects," *MPN*, January

29, 1921, 1028; "Camera-Man Acclaims Arliss," *MPN*, February 5, 1921, 1187; *ETR*, January 1, 1921, 420a.

126. Distinctive's use of the Biograph studio is cited in "Arliss Features?" *Wid's Daily*, April 12, 1921, 1, as well as in Sam Robert's 1965 interview with prop man Bill Nallin. But *Film Play Journal* (September 1921, 45) locates *Disraeli* at the Whitman Bennett studio in Yonkers.

127. *FDYBK* (1924), 297. The only films receiving more votes were the West Coast spectacles *The Covered Wagon*, *Merry-Go-Round*, *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, and *Robin Hood*.

128. "Arliss—'Big 4,'" *Wid's Daily*, April 27, 1921, 1.

129. *MPN*, December 8, 1923, 2660. The article refers to the film under its working title, *Blood and Gold*.

130. George Arliss, *My Ten Years in the Studios* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1940). His earlier autobiography, *Up the Years from Bloomsbury* (New York: Blue Ribbon, 1927), 284–95, at least has a flavorful account of the filming of *The Devil*.

131. "Eastern Studios," *Camera!* December 25, 1920.

132. "Adolf Philipp to Produce Three Two-Reelers a Month," *MPW*, September 27, 1919, 1995; advertisement for Adolf Philipp Film Company, *MPW*, December 27, 1919, 1099.

133. *ETR*, October 23, 1920, 2298.

134. "To Open Studio in Month," *MPW*, March 17, 1917, 1785; "Perret to Make Patriotic Series," *MPW*, June 22, 1918, 1725. Scott Jamieson, "Thrilling Stunts on Land and Sea," *Movie Weekly*, October 29, 1921, 4–5, 28, quotes Seitz as saying that his current serial heroine, Lucy Fox, "is the best serial woman I've ever known," with more "courage and ability" than Pearl White. See also *Camera!* December 25, 1920, September 10, 1921, and September 9, 1922.

135. Frank Leon Smith, "The Man Who Made Serials," *Films in Review* (October 1956), 380.

136. Koszarski, *Fort Lee*, 136–39.

137. Kevin Lewis, "A World across from Broadway," 39–51; Koszarski, *Fort Lee*, 168–91.

138. "Madge Evans in Natural Color Film," *MPW*, March 15, 1919, 1456.

139. Dorothea Herzog, "Rambling through the Studios in the East," *Movie Weekly*, November 26, 1921, 8; Kalton Lahue, *Bound and Gagged: The Story of the Silent Serials* (New York: Castle, 1968), 245–46.

140. "Boosting Fort Lee," *FD*, June 2, 1925.

141. Koszarski, *Fort Lee*, 191.

142. In *Stardust*, shot at the Paragon studio in 1921, Hampton plays an aspiring opera singer who rises to the top through her performance of *Thais* (in the Welles film, Susan Alexander struggles through Bernard Herrmann's oriental pastiche, *Salammbô*).

143. Quoted in Leatrice Gilbert Fountain, *Dark Star* (New York: St. Martin's, 1985), 62–63.

144. First announced as *Revolt of the Marionettes*, the film was initially promoted as a Hope Hampton vehicle. *FD*, May 31, 1925. See also Richard Haines, *Technicolor Movies* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1993), 7–8.

145. "New Movie Production Held Up by Short Strike," *Fort Lee Sentinel*, July 4, 1925.

146. Dorothea Herzog, "Rambling through the Studios in the East," *Movie Weekly*, June 10, 1922.

147. "Jans Puts Some Jazz in Jersey," *MPW*, May 31,



1919, 1319; “Jans and His Big Plans,” *MPN*, May 22, 1920, 4355. Jans thought the Peerless studio had “exceptionally good equipment” that allowed for lighting effects otherwise “impossible to obtain in a smaller and less adequately appointed studio.” “Jans Signs Up James Morrison,” *MPN*, January 17, 1920, 882. The other films on his program were *Love without Question*, *The Woman Business*, and *Wings of Pride*.

148. William K. Everson, program note for *Married?* New School for Social Research Film Series, March 27, 1981, Museum of Modern Art Film Study Center, NY.

149. “Marx Bros. in Films?” *Wid’s Daily*, April 8, 1921, 2.

150. “Marx Brothers in New Comedy Series,” *MPW*, April 16, 1921, 738.

151. Groucho Marx, “Bad Days Are Good Memories,” *Saturday Evening Post*, August 29, 1931, 12, 82.

152. Charlotte Chandler, *Hello, I Must Be Going: Groucho and His Friends* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1978), 265.

153. Koszarski, *Fort Lee*, 229. Among the Joy titles was *Over There*, directed by Joe Basil (“In Eastern Studios,” *FD*, May 2, 1926).

154. “In Eastern Studios,” *FD*, June 13, 1926.

155. “New York Motion Picture Studios,” *Queensborough*, January–February 1918, 20–21.

156. “Walsh Will Occupy Long Island Studio Soon,” *MPN*, February 7, 1920, 1484; “Municipal Studios Bankrupt,” *Wid’s Daily*, June 24, 1921, 6.

157. “Walsh Uses Three Studios to Hasten Mayflower Production,” *MPW*, September 4, 1920, 58.

158. *ETR*, October 9, 1920, 1922.

159. “Nine Stage Studio,” *FD*, December 16, 1923, 1; “Studio Held Up,” *FD*, March 9, 1924, 1.

160. In 1929, for example, there were 461 theaters catering “exclusively to colored audiences.” New York had ten, and Chicago housed a dozen; the great majority were concentrated in the South. “Colored Theaters,” *FDYBK* (1930), 794–95.

161. Solax Company advertisement, *MPW*, October 5, 1912. Just prior to release, the title had been changed from *Darktown Aristocrats*.

162. The standard history of race movies in this period, *Slow Fade to Black: The Negro in American Film, 1900–1942*, by Thomas Cripps (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), still provides the best overview of regional black film production and its relation to mainstream cinema.

163. An account of early race film production in Chicago can be found in Arnie Bernstein, *Hollywood on Lake Michigan: 100 Years of Chicago and the Movies* (Chicago: Lake Claremont Press, 1998), 46–60.

164. In his analysis of Micheaux and his films, J. Ronald Green suggests that *Within Our Gates* was designed as a formal response to D. W. Griffith and *The Birth of a Nation*. See *Straight Lick: The Cinema of Oscar Micheaux* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), 25–30.

165. A filmography of feature-length race movies (as well as the productions of other ethnic groups) can be found in the volume of the American Film Institute catalog entitled *Within Our Gates* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997). Larry Richards, *African American Films through 1959* (Jefferson, NC: Mc-

Farland, 1998), also lists short films and includes an extensive collection of advertising posters.

166. S. W. Garlington, “Oscar Micheaux, Producer, Dies,” *New York Amsterdam News*, April 7, 1951. This proportion may or may not be correct, but the claim certainly reflects Micheaux’s identification with the genre in his audience’s imagination.

167. *New York Age*, October 24, 1925, quoted in Richards, *African American Films through 1959*, 48. This style of location shooting suggests the approach used by Allan Dwan in Paramount’s *Night Life of New York*, filmed several months earlier.

168. Pearl Bowser and Louise Spence, *Writing Himself into History: Oscar Micheaux, His Silent Films, and His Audiences* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2000), 44–45.

169. See photos of these cabins in Koszarski, *Fort Lee*, 46.

170. Dorothea Herzog, “Rambling through the Studios in the East,” *Movie Weekly*, August 6, 1921, 8.

171. Henry T. Sampson, *Blacks in Black and White: A Source Book on Black Films* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow, 1977), 45. The Estee studio was a small rental facility in Harlem, aggressively promoted by Eugene Spitz. It had recently expanded to include an annex building at 209–214 East 124th Street. “New Estee Studio Opened in New York City,” *MPW*, December 13, 1919, 833.

172. Martin Duberman, *Paul Robeson* (New York: Knopf, 1988), 77. If Micheaux’s accounting was anything like Hollywood’s, it is unlikely that Robeson saw more than \$300 from this film.

173. Cripps, *Slow Fade to Black*, 191–93.

174. The creation of Reol was almost certainly an attempt to take advantage of Micheaux’s pioneering in this market. Lawrence Chenault, one of the Lafayette group, had already starred in Micheaux’s first New York films, and when Reol collapsed, Chenault went back to Micheaux.

175. “*The Sport of the Gods*,” *Billboard*, March 19, 1921, 69. Reference courtesy of Charlene Regester.

176. See *AFI Catalog* for the plot of *Spitfire*. The influence on Micheaux of Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. Du Bois is discussed at length by Green, *Straight Lick*, 203–17.

177. “Introducing Peter Jones of the Still Department, Selznick Fort Lee Studios,” *The Brain Exchange*, October 2, 1920, 8. According to the *AFI Catalog*, the Peter P. Jones Film Company of Chicago produced *The Slacker* in 1917, “probably the second all black feature made by a black production company.”

178. “Scenes from *The Midnight Ace*,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, March 24, 1928, A3; “Oscar Micheaux’s Brother Is Director,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, May 5, 1928, A3. See also Richards, *African American Films through 1959*, 62, 86, and 111 for *How High Is Up?*, *For His Mother’s Sake*, and *The Midnight Ace*.

#### Chapter 4: Studio City

1. “Fox Building New Headquarters,” *MPW*, June 7, 1919, 1471; “Fox Leases Studio at College Point, L.I.,” *MPN*, January 3, 1920, 451. The studio at College Point was originally Donnelly’s Grove and Pavilions, a fourteen-acre summer resort that had been converted for motion picture use in 1916 by Frank Powell Pro-

ductions. See “Progress in the Studios,” *ETR*, December 9, 1916.

2. “Sunless Temples of New York’s Movies,” *NYT* (book section), November 7, 1920.

3. William Fox to Sol Wurtzel, June 23, 1919, in *William Fox, Sol M. Wurtzel, and the Early Fox Film Corporation: Letters 1917–1923*, ed. Lillian Wurtzel Semenov and Carla Winter (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2001), 73 (hereafter *Fox and Wurtzel*).

4. “Motion-Picture Colony under One Roof,” *Scientific American*, June 21, 1919, 651.

5. “Fox Cornerstone Laid Impressively,” *MPW*, June 21, 1919, 1777.

6. “Fox Studios in Full Swing,” *MPN*, May 1, 1920, 3846; “Fox’s N.Y. Studio Formally Opened,” *MPN*, June 5, 1920, 4604.

7. Katherine Lyons, “Right Off the Reel,” *Boston Traveler*, April 13, 1922, 23. Herbert Brenon Collection, Frances Howard Goldwyn–Hollywood Regional Branch Library, Los Angeles Public Library.

8. “Sunless Temples.”

9. Richard and Diane Koszarski, “No Problems. They Liked What They Saw on Screen: An Interview with Joseph Ruttenberg,” *Film History* 1, no. 1 (1987), 70–71 (hereafter Koszarski, “Interview with Ruttenberg”).

10. Harold Sintzenich diary, November 15, 1920, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress (hereafter Sintzenich diary).

11. “Clemenceau’s Novel Now in Film,” *MPN*, January 17, 1920, 875.

12. William Fox to Sol Wurtzel, April 15, 1920, *Fox and Wurtzel*, 141.

13. “Pearl White Can Make No Serials for William Fox,” *Exhibitors Herald and Motography*, July 26, 1919, 68.

14. Except for a few shorts made for Lubin in Philadelphia and a single 1924 feature shot in France, White’s entire motion picture career played out in New York and New Jersey.

15. Julian Johnson, “The Girl on the Cover,” *Photoplay*, April 1920, 57. White’s mansion was located at 215th Place and 32nd Avenue. Although the building no longer exists, the grounds are open to the public as John Golden Park, named after the property’s subsequent owner. Joan Brown Wettingfield, “Early Movie Queen Had an Estate in Bayside,” *Bayside Times/Ledger*, October 3, 1996, 18.

16. See the entry for *The Tiger’s Cub* in *AFI Catalog*.

17. “White Moll Company Moves to New Fox Studio,” *MPW*, February 14, 1920.

18. *ETR*, June 12, 1920, 200; see also “The Face at Your Window,” *AFI Catalog*.

19. “Harry Millarde,” *Motion Picture Magazine*, July 1915, 94.

20. Quoted in Upton Sinclair, *Upton Sinclair Presents William Fox* (Los Angeles: privately printed, 1933), 60.

21. “Mr. Fox has taken the picture away from Mr. Millarde this morning,” Sintzenich diary, August 30, 1920. Sintzenich suggests that the *ad hoc* approach to the script was what caused production to drag on for so long in the first place. According to various diary entries, the company was working in the Manhattan studio by April 23, although some scenes were shot at

Fox’s Éclair studio, with a house in Coytesville being used for exteriors of the old homestead.

22. Dorothea Herzog, “Rambling through the Studios in the East,” *Movie Weekly*, November 19, 1921, 8.

23. “The Ten Best Pictures of the Year,” *Wid’s Year Book 1921*, 420.

24. See Richard Koszarski, *An Evening’s Entertainment: The Age of the Silent Feature Picture, 1915–1928* (New York: Scribners, 1990), 28–29.

25. Sinclair, *Sinclair Presents Fox*, 59; Koszarski, “Interview with Ruttenberg,” 72.

26. “\$45,000 Fire Drives Families from Homes in Little Ferry,” *Bergen Evening Record*, July 9, 1937, 1; David Pierce, “The Legion of the Condemned—Why American Silent Films Perished,” *Film History* 9, no. 1 (1997), 5.

27. Sol Wurtzel to J. Gordon Edwards, January 9, 1922, in *Fox and Wurtzel*, 167. Fox had been operating a Los Angeles studio since 1916.

28. Lugosi had considerable stage and screen experience in Hungary; *The Silent Command* was his first American film. He made a number of other low-budget New York films in this period, including *The Rejected Woman* (1924), *The Midnight Girl* (1925), and *Daughters Who Pay* (1925). See Arthur Lennig, *The Count* (New York: Putnam’s, 1974), 52–57.

29. Ted Altman interviewed by Sam Robert, November 1, 1963, collection of the Museum of the Moving Image, Astoria, NY. Millarde should have picked up some British crockery during his location stay there. According to the press book for the film, five months were spent in England shooting the picture “in its actual locations.” Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts (hereafter Billy Rose Collection, NYPL).

30. “Fox Studio Inactive,” *FD*, May 16, 1924, 1.

31. “Martha Mansfield Dead,” *FD*, December 2, 1923, 2.

32. “Fully Equipped Studio for Lease,” *FD*, June 5, 1924, 5.

33. *FD*, October 20, 1924, 1.

34. Around this same time, the Fox West Coast studio sent cameraman George Schneiderman to New York to shoot a few “location scenes” for *The Auctioneer* (1926), but this seems to have been for local color only. See *AC*, October 1926, 23.

35. After leaving Vitagraph in 1917, J. Stuart Blackton did operate a small studio of his own at 423 Classon Avenue. According to Anthony Slide and Alan Gevinson, the films he made there were so unsuccessful that he left the United States in 1920 to work in London. See Slide and Gevinson, *The Big V: A History of the Vitagraph Company*, rev. ed. (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow, 1987), 24–25. The facility was still known as the Blackton studio through 1925, but Blackton himself appears to have used the Vitagraph studio when he directed *Let No Man Put Asunder* on his return to America in 1923. See *MPN*, December 8, 1923, 2687.

36. See the Vitagraph filmography in Slide and Gevinson, *Big V*, 169–323.

37. Albert E. Smith and Phil Koury, *Two Reels and a Crank* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1952), 261–77. The major catalogue edited by Paolo Cherchi Usai, *Vitagraph Co. of America, Il cinema prima di Hollywood*

(Pordenone: Edizioni Studio Tesi, 1987), also suggests that anything of interest at Vitagraph stopped in 1916.

38. One of the few discussions of Corinne Griffith's career, and the apparent source of most later commentary, is Joe Franklin, *Classics of the Silent Screen: A Pictorial Treasury* (New York: Citadel, 1959), 174.

39. "Five Vitagraph Companies at Work in East," *ETR*, December 4, 1920, 29. Smith and Koury, *Two Reels and a Crank*, 267–68, discuss Zukor's move as part of Paramount's campaign to destroy Vitagraph as a competitor.

40. "What the Stars and Directors Are Doing Now," *Photoplay*, April 1925, 108; "Vitagraph Name Stays," *FD*, April 29, 1925, 1; "Vitagraph Company Purchased by Warner Bros.," *MPN*, May 2, 1925, 1929.

41. This account of *The Chronicles of America* is largely drawn from that given by Arthur Edwin Krows in his continuing series, "Motion Pictures—Not for Theatres," in *The Educational Screen*, specifically installments 34–36 (February, March, and April 1942).

42. Don Carlos Ellis and Laura Thornborough, *Motion Pictures in Education* (New York: Crowell, 1923). For the development of nonfiction and sponsored films in New York, see Chapter Ten, below.

43. Krows, "Motion Pictures—Not for Theatres," no. 35, *The Educational Screen* (March 1942), 104.

44. The same ships had been used for similar effect in *The Coming of Columbus* (Selig, 1912), one of the earliest American three-reel productions.

45. Vitagraph was the home base for *Chronicles of America*, and two years after *Columbus*, it was reported that the company "has taken over practically the entire plant" there (*FD*, May 19, 1924, 1). But at least part of *Wolfe and Montcalm* was shot at the Metro studio (*FD*, October 28, 1923, 10), and Frank Tuttle shot *The Puritans* at the Pyramid studio on Mill Street in Astoria (*FD*, February 25, 1924, 2).

46. "Christopher Columbus Breaking into Movies," *Movie Weekly*, August 12, 1922, 23, 31.

47. See Pathé's five-page advertising insert for the *Chronicles of America* in *MPN*, December 13, 1924.

48. "Half of Chronicles Made," *FD*, June 30, 1924, 2.

49. Krows, "Motion Pictures—Not for Theatres," no. 36, *The Educational Screen* (April 1942), 138.

50. "Fine Studios for Dyreda," *MPW*, May 15, 1915, 1053; Robert Duncan, "The Metro Studio," *Picture Play*, October 1916, 233–39; Alison Smith, "Little Journeys to Eastern Studios II—Metro," *NYDM*, July 21, 1917, 10.

51. "Officials Visit New Fox Plant," *MPN*, November 15, 1919, 3612.

52. "Metro Again to Produce in East," *MPN*, October 25, 1919, 3163.

53. Koszarski, *An Evening's Entertainment*, 80–82.

54. "Metro to Build Big Studios in East; To Get More Stars and Scenarists," *MPW*, February 28, 1920, 1447.

55. "Metro Rushes Repairs on New York Studio," *MPW*, March 20, 1920, 1987.

56. *MPN*, May 8, 1920, 4014.

57. See *AFI Catalog for Love, Honor and Obey*.

58. "Metroites Arrive in New York," *MPN*, June 5, 1920, 4645. Screenwriter Julia Burnham was already there.

59. *ETR*, June 12, 1920, 189.

60. *ETR*, July 10, 1920, 611.

61. Gladys Hall and Adele Fletcher, "We Discover Who Discovered Valentino," *Motion Picture Magazine*, June 1923, 93; Emily Leider, *Dark Lover: The Life and Death of Rudolph Valentino* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2003), 112.

62. "Back to Coast," *Wid's Daily*, March 15, 1921, 1.

63. It's obviously not correct to suggest, as Bosley Crowther does in *The Lion's Share: The Story of an Entertainment Empire* (New York: Dutton, 1957), 52, that the studio had never reopened after the war.

64. *ETR*, August 21, 1920, 1332.

65. "Metro's Use of Armory for *Message to Mars* Solves Production Problem," *ETR*, January 1, 1921, 425; *ETR*, January 8, 1921, 575; *ETR*, January 15, 1921, 676; "Spectacular Fire Staged," *MPN*, January 22, 1921, 872; Jenny June, "Rambling through the Studios of New York," *Movie Weekly*, February 19, 1921, 16.

66. Staulcup did earn credits on two Barbara La Marr films made in New Jersey in 1925, *Heart of a Siren* and *The White Monkey*. The first was shot at the Universal studio in Fort Lee (*FD*, February 1, 1925); the second, with an identical crew, was probably made there as well. Arthur Cadwell also earned a single credit with the Syracuse Motion Picture Company, *The Inner Man* (1922).

67. Crowther, *Lion's Share*, 51.

68. *FD*, October 20, 1924, 1. It may have been converted into a garage, but decades later, as ABC/City Stage 61, it was again being used for the production of features, notably *For Love of Ivy* (1968) starring Sidney Poitier.

69. Fred Lawrence Guiles, *Marion Davies: A Biography* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1972), 78–80. The studio may have been Pathé's newly acquired facility on 134th Street.

70. *New York American*, June 3, 1918, quoted in W. A. Swanberg, *Citizen Hearst: A Biography of William Randolph Hearst* (New York: Bantam, 1971), 386.

71. See *AFI Catalog*. Louis Pizzitola, in *Hearst over Hollywood: Power, Passion, and Propaganda in the Movies* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 99–100, traces the connection between Hearst and the Schenck brothers as far back as 1914.

72. "William Randolph Hearst to Enter Feature and Spectacle Production," *Exhibitors Herald and Motography*, March 29, 1919, 23.

73. David Nasaw, *The Chief: The Life of William Randolph Hearst* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2000), 283.

74. Telegram, William Randolph Hearst to Adolph Zukor, August 4, 1919, Adolph Zukor Collection, Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Beverly Hills.

75. For information on Marion, see Cari Beauchamp, *Without Lying Down: Frances Marion and the Powerful Women of Early Hollywood* (New York: Scribner's, 1997).

76. There is some question about the attribution of *The Dark Star* to Marion, although the *AFI Catalog* does credit it to her. Cari Beauchamp (*Without Lying Down*, 122) indicates Marion as the author of *The Restless Sex* (1920), which *AFI* attributes to the director, Robert Z. Leonard. It seems logical that Marion worked on both titles.

77. Pizzitola, *Hearst over Hollywood*, 192–97.
78. Studio locations for these films as cited in *AFL Catalog*.
79. For a good description of the reception of *Hu-moresque*, see Davide Turconi, “The Silent Films of Frank Borzage,” *Griffithiana* 46 (December 1992), 5. For Hurst’s reaction, see Beauchamp, *Without Lying Down*, 118.
80. “Old Sulzer Park for Movie Producers,” *New York American*, January 15, 1920, real estate section, 14.
81. *Exhibitors Herald*, January 26, 1924, quoted in Pizzitola, *Hearst over Hollywood*, 217. Ironically, not long after Hearst made this statement, changing business conditions would convince him to move his motion picture operation to California.
82. Leon Barsacq and Elliott Stein, *Caligari’s Cabinet and Other Grand Illusions: A History of Film Design* (Boston: New York Graphic Society, 1976), 241–42.
83. Swanberg, *Citizen Hearst*, 432.
84. Beverly Heisner, *Hollywood Art: Art Direction in the Days of the Great Studios* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1990), 18. See also Donald Albrecht’s discussion of Urban in *Designing Dreams: Modern Architecture in the Movies* (New York: Harper & Row, 1986), 20–22.
85. *MPN*, May 1, 1920, 3869.
86. *ETR*, July 31, 1920, 930; Nasaw, *The Chief*, 303.
87. “The Finishing Touches,” *Wid’s Daily*, March 26, 1921, 1. But *Camera!* (May 7, 1921) shows *Just Around the Corner* in production at 127th Street.
88. “Leases New Studio,” *Wid’s Daily*, June 7, 1921, 1.
89. Swanberg, *Citizen Hearst*, 401–2. They were probably looking at *Enchantment*, which was written by Reed and had just been completed.
90. Robert E. Sherwood, *The Best Moving Pictures of 1922–23* (Boston: Small, Maynard, 1923), 52.
91. Arthur Scanlon interviewed by Sam Robert, n.d., collection of the Museum of the Moving Image, Astoria, NY.
92. Sherwood, *Best Moving Pictures of 1922–23*, 52.
93. Lewis F. Levenson, “The Follies Go into the Movies,” *Movie Weekly*, December 9, 1922, 25; David Stenn, *Clara Bow: Running Wild* (New York: Penguin, 1990), 25.
94. Robert Vignola trade advertisement, *FDYBK* (1924), 20.
95. This account of the fire is drawn from “Fire Destroys Huge Studio of Cosmopolitan,” *New York American*, February 19, 1923, 5; “\$1,000,000 Blaze Ruins Film Studio,” *NYT*, February 19, 1923, 1; and “Fire Damages Cosmopolitan Plant,” *MPN*, March 3, 1923, 1030.
96. “Little Old New York,” *NYT*, August 2, 1923, 10.
97. “Hand Painting Films,” *American Projectionist*, September 1923, 3. Brock worked out of his home at 528 Riverside Drive. For a list of his work, see his ad in *FDYBK* (1925), 256. The same technique had been used for *When Knighthood Was in Flower* to paint the torches of a squadron of French chasseurs pursuing Marion Davies through a forest, an effect Robert E. Sherwood remembered as “startling” and “beautifully managed.” Sherwood, *Best Moving Pictures of 1922–23*, 52.
98. “\$25 Million Merger of Movie Interests Aims to Rival Famous Players–Lasky,” *NYT*, May 23, 1923, 1.
99. Koszarski, *An Evening’s Entertainment*, 80–83.
100. Swanberg, *Citizen Hearst*, has the classic account of Hearst’s political problems during the early 1920s. For San Simeon, see Ken Murray, *The Golden Days at San Simeon* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1971).
101. “Art and Old Hokum,” *NYT*, August 10, 1924, VII 2. “If Mr. Griffith had never made Paul Revere’s ride, this spectacle in *Janice Meredith* would be one of its outstanding features,” the *Times* reported. Hearst’s Paul Revere was played by future Western star Ken Maynard, but the moment when Griffith’s Revere, Harry O’Neill, falls off his horse provides a human touch lacking in Hopper’s version.
102. William K. Everson, *The Art of W. C. Fields* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1967), 26.
103. “Story of a Production,” *NYT*, August 24, 1924, VII 2.
104. *MPN*, December 29, 1923, 2984H.
105. “In a Bronx Film Studio,” *NYT*, February 10, 1924, VII 5.
106. “Cosmopolitan Prominent in New Program,” *MPN*, July 19, 1924. “Beauty Bound and Gagged,” *NYT*, May 25, 1924, X 2, describes a visit to the set at Tilford, where Davies was forced to sit for over an hour with “a rope around her ankles and a kerchief around her mouth” until Hopper was satisfied with the staging.
107. Benjamin Hampton, *A History of the Movies* (New York: Covici, Friede, 1931), 278.
108. “Rowland Back,” *FD*, February 5, 1924, 1.
109. “First National Will Bring Two Production Units to New York Next Month,” *MPN*, October 4, 1924, 1708. Sills and Kenyon were married at this time.
110. *NYT*, October 18, 1924, 18. This was not strictly true, as Griffith had moved his entire operation east five years earlier.
111. “East Becomes Active,” *FD*, May 19, 1924, 1; “Movies as Investments,” *Barron’s*, April 14, 1924, 1; “Movies Come East from Hollywood,” *Wall Street Journal*, April 7, 1924, 9.
112. *I Want My Man* (1925) press book, Billy Rose Collection, NYPL.
113. Jeff Rovin, *From the Land Beyond Beyond: The Films of Willis O’Brien and Ray Harryhausen* (New York: Berkley, 1977), 13–21. For the Azores location, see *FD*, February 11, 1925, 1. As late as October 1925, Hammeras was still in New York, touted as the studio’s head of trick photography; “In Eastern Studios,” *FD*, October 16, 1925.
114. *FD*, September 20, 1925, and January 26, 1926.
115. “In Eastern Studios,” *FD*, April 11, 1926.
116. See the press books for *Just Another Blonde*, *Subway Sadie*, and *Puppets*, Billy Rose Collection, NYPL.
117. Edeson brought along his new assistant, Gregg Toland; *AC*, August 1926, 20. Van Enger was at the peak of his career, having just photographed *The Phantom of the Opera* (1925) and a string of Ernst Lubitsch comedies.
118. Barry Paris, *Louise Brooks* (New York: Knopf, 1989), 158–62.
119. *The Perfect Sap* press book, Billy Rose Collection, NYPL.
120. *FD*, October 19, 1924, 1.
121. Cosmopolitan Studios advertisement, *FDYBK* (1926), 368.
122. “Large Harlem Plant,” *FD*, December 4, 1924, 1.



123. An oddball pirate comedy starring Follies headliner Leon Errol, *Clothes Make the Pirate* was directed by Maurice Tourneur, who filmed much of it on a four-masted schooner sailing up and down the East Coast. Later, a full-sized replica of the ship was built inside the studio by Charles O. Seesel. *Clothes Make the Pirate* press book, Billy Rose Collection, NYPL.

124. Pizzitola, *Hearst over Hollywood*, 225–26.

125. “Chair of Learning,” *FD*, August 26, 1925, 1.

126. Patterson was “instructor in Photoplay composition” at Columbia from 1917. She published three books on the subject, the last of which, *Motion Picture Continuities*, was issued by Columbia University Press in 1929. She was also a working screenwriter and functioned as editorial director for Maurice Schwartz on his film *Broken Hearts* (1926). “In Eastern Studios,” *FD*, October 18, 1925.

127. Gloria Swanson, *Swanson on Swanson* (New York: Random House, 1980), 326.

128. *Ibid.*, 281–87.

129. Murphy’s contribution to *Ballet mécanique* had long been underestimated, but research by William Moritz indicates that he was the film’s true creator. See Moritz, “Americans in Paris: Man Ray and Dudley Murphy,” in *Lovers of Cinema: The First American Film Avant-Garde, 1919–1945*, ed. Jan-Christopher Horak (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1995), 118–36.

130. Swanson, *Swanson on Swanson*, 286–87.

131. *EDR*, November 18, 1926, and January 8, 1927 (“Hearst-Shubert Deal off on Cosmopolitan”).

132. *EDR*, January 19 and 29, 1927.

133. Quoted in Frank Capra, *The Name Above the Title* (New York: Macmillan, 1971), 72–77. Hayward was exaggerating slightly. There was at least one serial shooting at the Cosmopolitan studio at the same time Capra was there, *The Masked Menace*. One wonders if Capra took the opportunity to meet its leading lady, Jean Arthur. *EDR*, April 30, 1927.

134. Barbara Stanwyck had just appeared on Broadway in *The Noose*; Sylvia Sydney had been in A. H. Woods’s *Crime*. Although much is made of Sidney’s appearance in the *Broadway Nights* press book (Billy Rose Collection, NYPL), she has no official billing in the picture.

135. *Dance Magic* press book, Billy Rose Collection, NYPL.

136. Capra, *Name Above the Title*, 73.

137. *AFI Catalog*.

138. *Convoy* press book, Billy Rose Collection, NYPL.

139. Capra, *Name Above the Title*, 73.

140. *For the Love of Mike* press book, Billy Rose Collection, NYPL. Capra did direct the close shots of the race, which he filmed at the New Rochelle Rowing Club course.

141. Capra, *Name Above the Title*, 77, 168.

142. *FD*, June 17, 1925; *Classified* press book, Billy Rose Collection, NYPL.

143. *Syncopating Sue* press book, Billy Rose Collection, NYPL.

144. *AC*, October 1926, 10. Photography for this film is credited to George Folsey, who had already relocated to California by the time it was shot. The man sent east

to film the locations was Charles Van Enger, who had been working there a few months earlier for the Rockett brothers.

145. “James Cruze and William de Mille Examples of Different Schools of Direction,” *FD*, June 22, 1924, 31.

146. *FD*, February 1 and August 17, 1925. But *Photoplay* (April 1925, 108) claims that at least some of the picture was shot at the Fox studio on 55th Street.

147. David Pierce, “‘Carl Laemmle’s Outstanding Achievement,’” *Film History* 10, no. 4 (1998), 459.

148. Axel Madsen, *William Wyler: The Authorized Biography* (New York: Crowell, 1973), 59–61.

149. Margerite Tazelaar, “Jean Hersholt between the Acts,” *NYHT*, July 8, 1928, reprinted in *Universal Weekly*, July 21, 1928, 11.

150. “Sidney, Recovered, in N.Y.,” *FD*, July 26, 1928, 2. Oddly enough, Paul Fejos’s *Lonesome* (1928), a film specifically about New York singles and a day at Coney Island, was shot entirely on the West Coast earlier that same year. The amusement park at Venice Beach doubled for Luna Park. See *Lonesome* press book, Billy Rose Collection, NYPL.

151. A. Scott Berg, *Goldwyn: A Biography* (New York: Knopf, 1989), 182–85.

152. “Short Shots from New York Studios,” *FD*, November 22, 1928, 4; “Hall Arriving in New York,” *FD*, November 27, 1928, 2.

153. King Vidor, *A Tree Is a Tree* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1953), 150–52.

154. “Camera Expert Studies Old Masters for Effects,” *NYT*, June 12, 1927, X 4.

155. The chaos is evident in home movie footage taken by a contemporary European tourist and screened at the Pordenone Silent Film Festival in 1995.

156. Buster Keaton, *My Wonderful World of Slapstick* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1967), 209.

157. Documentation of both the New York and the Los Angeles locations used in *The Cameraman* can be found in John Bengtson, *Silent Echoes: Discovering Early Hollywood through the Films of Buster Keaton* (Santa Monica: Santa Monica Press, 2000), 219–30.

158. *AC*, September 1927, 9; “Lloyd’s Experts Drafting Plans for the Star’s Gotham ‘Shots,’” *MPW*, June 11, 1927, 425. No Astoria studio shots appear to have been used in the final film.

159. Harold Lloyd, *An American Comedy* (New York: Dover, 1971), 103. This reprint of Lloyd’s 1928 autobiography contains an excellent contemporary account of the production of *Speedy*.

160. Like Jack Dempsey, “Babe” Ruth was a local celebrity who occasionally appeared in movies. In 1920 he starred in *Headin’ Home*, partially filmed on location in Haverstraw, New York (*ETR*, September 11, 1920, 1638). Raoul Walsh claimed to have directed Ruth in the film (*ETR*, October 2, 1920, 1944), although Lawrence Windom is generally credited as director.

161. Lloyd, *An American Comedy*, 99–100.

## Chapter 5: Edison’s Dream

1. *Montreal Daily Star*, April 20, 1895, reprinted in *Film History* 11, no. 4 (1999), 404–7.

2. Charles Musser dates the filming of the *Dickson Experimental Sound Film* as somewhere between September 1894 and April 1895. *Edison Motion Pictures*,

1890–1900: *An Annotated Filmography* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1997), 178.

3. Charles Musser, *The Emergence of Cinema: The American Screen to 1907* (New York: Scribner's, 1990), 87–88.

4. See the special issue on "Global Experiments in Early Synchronous Sound," *Film History* 11, no. 4 (1999).

5. David Hulfish, *Motion Picture Work* (Chicago: American School of Correspondence, 1913), 256. This work was originally published in 1911 in two volumes. Note the photographs of sound film production on pages 256–57.

6. "Motion Pictures Are Made to Talk," *NYT*, August 27, 1910, 8.

7. Scott Eyman, *The Speed of Sound: Hollywood and the Talkie Revolution, 1926–1930* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997), 32–33.

8. Robert Grau, *The Theatre of Science: A Volume of Progress and Achievement in the Motion Picture Industry* (New York: Broadway Publishing, 1914), 351.

9. Rosalind Rogoff, "Edison's Dream," *Cinema Journal* 15, no. 2 (Spring 1976), 66–67.

10. "Week's Bill at Theatres," *NYT*, April 22, 1913, 11. Two of the remaining houses were showing Kinemacolor films, suggesting that this early color film process may have provided a model for Edison's Kinetophone distribution policy.

11. Some multiple-reel subjects do appear to have been produced. *The Deaf Mute*, for example, is said to have been issued in five parts (Rogoff, "Edison's Dream," 63), which would have been the equivalent of a conventional two-reeler. But the single reel that survives appears complete in itself.

12. Harry M. Geduld, *The Birth of the Talkies: From Edison to Jolson* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1975), 68.

13. Viola Dana interviewed by Richard Koszarski, 1972, Woodland Hills, CA.

14. Quoted in Eyman, *Speed of Sound*, 35.

15. Miller Reese Hutchinson quoted in Robert Conot, *A Streak of Luck* (New York: Seaview, 1979), 397.

16. Rogoff, "Edison's Dream," 67, suggests that the factory fire of December 9, 1914, was the crucial event, but Neil Baldwin claims that the Kinetophone manufacturing facility was one of the structures spared in the blaze. Baldwin, *Edison: Inventing the Century* (New York: Hyperion, 1995), 336. A less publicized studio fire in the Bronx a few months earlier may actually have been more significant. See "Fire Wrecks Edison Studio," *MPW*, April 11, 1914, 196.

17. "Americans Don't Want Talking Movies; Prefer Silent Film Shows, Says Edison," *NYT*, May 21, 1926, 12.

18. Lee De Forest, "Pioneering in Talking Pictures," *JSMPE* 36 (January 1941), 41–42. Garity later became one of Hollywood's most important sound technicians.

19. E. I. Sponable, Case's assistant, minimizes De Forest's contributions in "Historical Development of Sound Films, Pts. 1–2," *JSMPE* 48 (April 1947), 275–303. But De Forest was never one to share credit easily and claimed that Case merely built what he had sketched out for him. See De Forest, "Pioneering in Talking Pictures."

20. Quoted in Donald Crafton, *The Talkies: American Cinema's Transition to Sound, 1926–1931* (New York: Scribners, 1997), 63–70.

21. *Ibid.*, 69–70.

22. Lee De Forest, "The Phonofilm," *TSMPE*, no. 16 (1923), 72.

23. Crafton, *The Talkies*, 64.

24. Lee De Forest, "Recent Developments in 'The Phonofilm,'" *TSMPE*, no. 27 (1926), 71. The surprisingly high figure is claimed by De Forest supporter Maurice Zouary and repeated by Geduld, *Birth of the Talkies*, 96. No definitive list is available.

25. "Music of the Movies," *NYT*, August 10, 1924, VII 2; Lee De Forest, "Phonofilm Progress," *TSMPE*, no. 20 (1924), 19; De Forest, "Pioneering in Talking Pictures," 45.

26. Leslie Cabarga, *The Fleischer Story* (New York: Nostalgia Press, 1976), 16–18. This must have been the first "talking" cartoon film.

27. De Forest, "Pioneering in Talking Pictures," 45–46.

28. "Crashing the Lambs," *MPN*, May 9, 1925, 2042. Allan Dwan directed the footage.

29. Tom Lewis, *Empire of the Air: The Men Who Made Radio* (New York: HarperCollins, 1991), 82–85.

30. This footage, and examples illustrating other early sound processes, can be found on the DVD set *Unseen Cinema: Early American Avant-Garde Film 1894–1941* (Image Entertainment, 2005).

31. Sponable, "Historical Development of Sound Films, Pts. 1–2," 283–303.

32. E. I. Sponable, "Historical Development of Sound Films, Pts. 3–7," *JSMPE* 48 (May 1947), 422.

33. Glendon Allvine, *The Greatest Fox of Them All* (New York: Lyle Stuart, 1969), 71–75. Allvine worked for both Zukor and Fox during this period. See also Sponable, "Historical Development of Sound Films, Pts. 1–2," 301.

34. Sheldon Hochheiser, "AT&T and the Development of Sound Motion-Picture Technology," in *The Dawn of Sound: American Moviemakers*, ed. Mary Lea Bandy (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1989), 23–33.

35. "Vitagraph Company Purchased by Warner Bros.," *MPN*, May 2, 1925, 1929. The acquisition was announced on April 22.

36. E. S. Gregg, *Shadow of Sound* (New York: Vantage, 1967), 15–16.

37. Fitzhugh Green, *The Film Finds Its Tongue* (New York: Putnam's, 1929), 50 (italics in original).

38. Jack L. Warner, *My First Hundred Years in Hollywood* (New York: Random House, 1965), 168. See also Harry M. Warner, "Future Developments," in *The Story of the Films, as Told by Leaders of the Industry . . .*, ed. Joseph P. Kennedy (Chicago: A. W. Shaw, 1927), esp. 319–20, where Harry tells the same story, with a bit more reserve, to Harvard's Graduate School of Business Administration.

39. E. C. Mills, "The Musician, the Movie, and the Music Tax," *Metronome*, September 15, 1926, 26.

40. De Forest, "Phonofilm Progress," 19.

41. For a discussion of musical practice in late silent-era movie houses, see Richard Koszarski, *An Evening's Entertainment: The Age of the Silent Feature Picture*,



1915–1928 (New York: Scribners, 1990), 41–51. Rick Altman's highly detailed *Silent Film Sound* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), concentrates mainly on earlier silent film presentation.

42. Green, *Film Finds Its Tongue*, 56–59.

43. "In Eastern Studios," *FD*, May 20, 1926. Production dates of the Vitaphone shorts are given in the filmography in *Dawn of Sound*, 44–45.

44. Jack Warner, *My First Hundred Years in Hollywood*, 170, not only reports the blasting story, but claims that it was he who suggested filming at night.

45. Ed Du Par quoted in James Cameron, *Talking Movies* (New York: Cameron Publishing, 1927), 77.

46. Green, *Film Finds Its Tongue*, 63–66.

47. Robert E. Sherwood, "The Silent Drama: *Don Juan* and the Vitaphone," *Life*, August 26, 1926, 26. It should be noted that the program of shorts screened for the press was not the same one that appeared on opening night. See Richard Koszarski, "On the Record: Seeing and Hearing the Vitaphone," in *Dawn of Sound*, 15–21.

48. Charles Wolfe, "On the Track of the Vitaphone Short," in *Dawn of Sound*, 41n.15.

49. Bill Nallin interviewed by Sam Robert, 1965, collection of the Museum of the Moving Image, Astoria, NY. Nallin was the man ordered to clean out the building. He became the head grip at Movietone and worked with Sponable in building the studio's first amplifier.

50. Cameron, *Talking Movies*, 58–74; "How Movietone Met Its Problems," *FD*, July 1, 1928, 39.

51. Sponable, "Historical Development of Sound Films, Pts. 3–7," 407–8. Harry Lauder was quite aware of the possibilities of talking film. He had made a successful series of sound-on-disc films in Chicago in February 1914. See Scott Curtis, "If it's Not Scottish, It's Crap!": Harry Lauder Sings for Selig," *Film History* 11, no. 4 (1999), 418–25.

52. Peter Bogdanovich, *Allan Dwan: The Last Pioneer* (New York: Praeger, 1971), 84; Crafton, *The Talkies*, 96–98.

53. "Short Subjects," *FDYBK* (1929), 480.

54. *Cumulative Copyright Catalog, Motion Pictures 1912–1939* (Washington, DC: Library of Congress, 1951), 296, shows these credits; but the *Film Daily* reported that Raoul Walsh directed *Early Mourning* while in New York ("Gertrude Lawrence Again on Movietone, In Feature?," July 25, 1928, 4).

55. Sponable, "Historical Development of Sound Films, Pts. 3–7," 411–12.

56. "MGM's Eastern Shorts Now Total 117 Subjects," *FD*, April 21, 1929, 10; "Vogue Fashion Film Is Completed at Fox Studio," *FD*, November 1, 1929, 2.

57. "Short Shots," *FD*, November 12, 1930, 5.

58. Mordaunt Hall, "The Screen," *NYT*, October 8, 1926, 23.

59. Green, *Film Finds Its Tongue*, 213.

60. "Vitagraph Studio to Be Reopened by Warners," *FD*, August 21, 1928, 6. This announcement came only a few weeks after Warners was said to be stripping equipment out of the studio because "[t]here is little likelihood of the plant being used for the production of sound films." "Distribute Equipment from Vitaphone Studio," *FD*, June 1, 1928, 7. See also "Bryan Foy to Make Shorts at Warner Brooklyn Studio," *FD*, Octo-

ber 30, 1928, 2; "Foy Leaves for New York," *FD*, November 26, 1928, 2.

61. "Short Shots," *FD*, February 21, 1929, 8, and March 8, 1929, 4.

62. "More Short Production Planned at Warners," *FD*, December 15, 1929, 6.

63. "Short Shots," *FD*, April 14, 1929, 8; "Sees Pictures Promoting Modernistic Furniture," *FD*, September 16, 1929, 3.

64. "Starting All-German Film," *FD*, May 19, 1929, 10.

65. "The Royal Box," *NYT*, December 15, 1929, X 8.

66. "Plan Foreign Language Shorts at Brooklyn," *FD*, August 12, 1929, 10; "Warner Bros. Making Spanish Shorts Series," *FD*, July 6, 1930, 5; "Warner Bros. Rushing Foreign Short Subjects," *FD*, July 20, 1930, 1.

67. "Foy Leaves for New York," *FD*, Nov. 26, 1928, 2; "Murray Roth Directing All Shorts at Vitaphone," *FD*, June 2, 1929, 6.

68. "Short Shots," *FD*, October 20, 1929, 6.

69. Thomas Cripps, *Slow Fade to Black: The Negro in American Film, 1900–1942* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 231; "Short Shots," *FD*, April 18, 1930, 9.

70. Porter H. Evans (Eastern Studios, Warner Bros. Vitaphone Corporation), "A Comparative Study of Sound on Disc and Film," *JSMPE* 15 (August 1930), 185–92.

71. "Vitaphone 100% Outdoors," *FD*, July 13, 1930, 2.

72. "B'klyn Vitagraph Studio Celebrates Anniversary," *FD*, December 21, 1930, 5.

73. Regardless of their value as cultural artifacts, it must be admitted that not all these shorts were of equally high quality. "I appeared in one jungle-type short for Warner Brothers, but I don't think it ever saw a screen," Ethel Merman recalled. "I was dressed in a leather sarong and sang a song with a lot of tomtoms booming behind me. Even while I was making it I thought: *No one will ever have the gall to show this on a screen*. It was awful." Ethel Merman, *Who Could Ask for Anything More* (New York: Doubleday, 1955), 71. This was probably *The Cave Club*. See "Short Shots," *FD*, March 23, 1930, 9.

74. "Short Shots," *FD*, October 23, 1930, 6.

75. "Recording Apparatus on New Stage Ready Soon," *FD*, November 17, 1929, 6.

76. "Murray Roth Film Started on New \$300,000 Vitaphone Stage," *Exhibitors Herald-World*, December 7, 1929, 41; "Short Shots," *FD*, June 25, 1930, 6; "Vast Building Program Planned by Warner Bros.," *FD*, November 3, 1930, 1.

77. "Amusement Stocks in 1931 Dropped More than 75 P.C.," *FD*, January 3, 1932, 1.

78. "Short Shots," *FD*, April 24, 1931, 9; "Vitaphone Postpones Reopening of Studio," *FD*, June 24, 1931, 1.

79. "Van Dine Series Reduced," *FD*, November 16, 1931, 1; "Short Shots," *FD*, December 7, 1931, 6.

80. "Murray Roth Resigns from Vitaphone Studio," *FD*, February 10, 1932, 1.

81. Eileen Creelman, "Picture Plays and Players," *New York Sun*, September 12, 1932.

82. "Only 2 RKO Films to Be Made in New York," *FD*, May 23, 1929, 2.

83. For information on film production in these

other cities, and clues as to why it did not survive the silent period, see Arnie Bernstein, *Hollywood on Lake Michigan: 100 Years of Chicago and the Movies* (Chicago: Lake Claremont Press, 1998); Geoffrey Bell, *The Golden Gate and the Silver Screen* (Rutherford, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1984); and (for Philadelphia) Joseph Eckhardt, *The King of the Movies: Film Pioneer Siegmund Lubin* (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1997).

84. “*The Shanghai Gesture* to Be First on Vocafilm,” *FD*, August 10, 1928, 2; “Eva Le Galliienne Signs for MGM Sound Films,” *FD*, August 19, 1928, 1.

85. Patterson McNutt did produce a “2000 foot” version of his play *This Thing Called Love* on the stage of the Maxine Elliott Theater, using “special lighting equipment and an amateur camera.” “Play Filmed on Stage,” *FD*, October 8, 1928, 2. The “amateur camera” might have been 35mm or 16mm. It is likely that this production was silent. It was not intended as a commercial release; instead, it served as a guide for directors of stock companies and an aid to foreign sales.

86. One recent exception is Edwin M. Bradley, *The First Hollywood Sound Shorts, 1926–1931* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2005), which contains a brief overview of short-film production and extensive (though still incomplete) filmographies of the major producers. Needless to say, most of the activity described was in New York, not Hollywood.

87. “Short Subject Releases: 1929 Releases of Thirty-six Companies,” *FDYBK* (1930), 378–79. The figure also excludes serials and newsreels.

88. “Active Studios,” *FD*, July 1, 1928, 45.

89. “Great Actors’ Series in Production in New York,” *FD*, June 3, 1928, 5. The title of *The Dancing Town* is actually given here as *Prancing Prune*, which may or may not have been a gag.

90. For example, all early Bogart biographies seem unaware of *The Dancing Town*, although A. M. Sperber and Eric Lax, in *Bogart* (New York: William Morrow, 1997), 38, do acknowledge its existence.

91. Quoted in Bosley Crowther, *The Lion’s Share: The Story of an Entertainment Empire* (New York: Dutton, 1957), 145.

92. “MGM Leases New York Studio for Sound Films,” *FD*, July 24, 1928, 1.

93. “Bowes Sound Film Head for MGM in New York,” *FD*, July 26, 1928, 5.

94. “MGM’s Eastern Shorts Now Total 117 Subjects,” *FD*, April 21, 1929, 10.

95. Herbert T. Edelman, a sound engineer at the studio, remembered that the foghorn problem was insoluble. Edelman interviewed by Richard Koszarski, June 1985.

96. “Fox May Make Several Films at Metro Plant,” *FD*, April 14, 1929, 8.

97. “Morris Making Tests,” *FD*, August 23, 1928, 2; “Vidor Picks Negro Cast,” *FD*, Oct. 15, 1928, 2.

98. “Short Shots,” *FD*, November 22, 1928, 4, and December 6, 1928, 2; “Hollywood Best, Says Considine on Return,” *FD*, December 27, 1928, 11. It is unclear why this film was to have been made by United Artists and not MGM.

99. “M-G-M Averaging Eight Shorts Weekly in N.Y. Studios,” *MPN*, December 29, 1928.

100. “Short Shots,” *FD*, March 10, 1929, 4; David Mendoza, “The Theme Song,” *American Hebrew*, March 15, 1929, 124.

101. “MGM’s Eastern Shorts Now Total 117 Subjects,” *FD*, April 21, 1929, 10. This number seems high, as MGM never released this many Movietone Acts. Perhaps it includes tests and individual numbers later grouped together in one Movietone release.

102. One artifact of this abortive combination was the appearance of MGM’s silent Western star Colonel Tim McCoy at the Fox Movietone studio on 54th Street. Press reports had him directing *A Night on the Range* (in which he also appeared) and *Hot Shots* (“Short Shots,” *FD*, April 7, 1929, 7). McCoy expert Les Adams indicates Nick Grinde as the director and describes *A Night on the Range* as “basically a voice-test for McCoy which, at least as far as MGM was concerned, he flunked.” E-mail message from oldcorral@sbcglobal.net, June 8, 2005. Bradley, *First Hollywood Sound Shorts*, 189, 191, shows both films as Fox Movietone releases.

103. “Short Shots,” *FD*, April 14, 1929, 8, and May 1, 1929, 10.

104. “M-G-M Averaging Eight Shorts Weekly in N.Y. Studios.”

105. “Report MGM Ending Eastern Production,” *FD*, May 6, 1929, 1; “Cosmopolitan Studios Expected to Resume Soon,” *FD*, March 14, 1930, 1.

106. W. E. Thiesen, “Pioneering in the Talking Picture,” *JSMPE* 36 (April 1941), 437–41.

107. Lewis, *Empire of the Air*, 144–47, 154–55.

108. Sarnoff approved Vladimir Zworykin’s request to spend as much as \$100,000 on the development of electronic television in late December 1928, just as the sound film battle between RCA and AT&T was at its height. Albert Abramson, *The History of Television, 1880–1941* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1987), 123.

109. Crafton, *The Talkies*, 133–42.

110. See cameraman Frank Zucker’s advertisement in *FD*, July 1, 1928, 134.

111. “RCA Studio Plans Rest upon Biograph Survey,” *FD*, Oct. 19, 1928, 1; “RCA Photophone Picks Site for N.Y. Studio,” *FD*, Nov. 15, 1928, 1. Currier is best known for his work with Hal Roach. See Randy Skretvedt, *Laurel and Hardy: The Magic Behind the Movies* (Beverly Hills, CA: Moonstone Press, 1987).

112. “Short Shots,” *FD*, December 2, 1928, 12, and January 13, 1929, 12. Jessel was already well known as the actor who had talked himself out of the leading role in Warners’ *The Jazz Singer*, a part he had created onstage and a success that *Lucky Boy* clearly sought to emulate. If Jolson was driven by some inner demon, Jessel’s work ethic was far more pragmatic. “It’s simply a business proposition with me,” he said of his move from stage to screen. “I want the money. It’s not ideals or anything else. I can’t honestly tell you that I have entered motion pictures to express a suppressed desire, or to make people happy.” George Jessel, “Why I Alternate on Stage and Screen,” *Theatre Magazine*, February 1928, 22.

113. “Short Shots,” *FD*, January 6, 1929, 12.

114. “RCA-Photophone Studio in N.Y. Opens Soon,” *FD*, February 11, 1929, 1. The size of the Gramercy studio stages was never reported the same way twice. A few weeks later *FD* (“Short Shots,” April 1, 8) said the studio

was currently using a 60 × 200-foot stage, “probably the largest in the East”; an August 2 advertisement (*FD*, 5) reported the size of the main stage as 175 × 75.

115. Cameron, *Talking Movies*, 20–36.

116. “Short Shots,” *FD*, April 1, 1929, 8; “Chesterfield Makes Musical Film for RCA,” *FD*, November 24, 1929, 7; “Beecroft Set to Start First Feature at RCA,” *FD*, December 17, 1929, 16; “Short Shots,” *FD*, April 15, 1929, 6.

117. “Carr in *Gunboat Ginsburg*,” *FD*, August 11, 1929, 10.

118. Quoted in Miles Kreuger, ed., *The Movie Musical from Vitaphone to “42nd Street,” as Reported in a Great Fan Magazine* (New York: Dover, 1975), 154.

119. “Half of Radio’s Shorts to be Made in N.Y.,” *FD*, July 7, 1929, 7.

120. “Short Shots,” *FD*, April 1, 1929, 8.

121. A photo of van Vechten and Murphy on the set is reproduced on page 132 of William Moritz’s essay “Americans in Paris,” in *Lovers of Cinema: The First American Film Avant-Garde, 1919–1945*, ed. Jan-Christopher Horak (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1995).

122. Other titles in the Connelly series included *The Bridegroom* and *The Rounders*. See *FD*, April 14, 1929, 8, May 26, 1929, 10, July 7, 1929, 7, and November 24, 1929, 7.

123. Robert Benchley quoted in Leonard Maltin, *The Great Movie Shorts* (New York: Crown, 1972), 166. Benchley thought he made the film in Hollywood; his biographer Billy Altman, in *Laughter’s Gentle Soul* (New York: Norton, 1997), 247–48, says it was made at the Astoria studio, which was not even equipped for sound when *The Treasurer’s Report* was shot.

124. See Donald Ogden Stewart in *Humorous Flights and Traffic Regulations* (both Paramount, 1929); Fred Allen in *Fred Allen’s Prize Playlets* (Vitaphone, 1929), *The Still Alarm* (Vitaphone, 1930), and *The Installment Collector* (Paramount, 1931); and Alexander Woolcott in *Mr. W’s Little Game* (Paramount, 1934), all produced in New York.

125. See biographies of Sandrich, Boasberg, and Meehan in the *Motion Picture Almanac* for 1933. John Leo Meehan should not be confused with John Meehan, another screenwriter active in this period.

126. “Short Shots,” *FD*, April 28, 1929, 7.

127. “Currier Directs Rudy Vallee Short for RKO,” *FD*, July 28, 1929, 7; “Complete RCA Shorts,” *FD*, August 18, 1929, 6.

128. “Short Shots,” *FD*, April 28, 1929, 7; RKO short-film advertisement, *FD*, August 27, 1929, 4–5; “20 of 26 Gramercy Shorts Now Completed,” *FD*, November 3, 1929, 6. See also Susan Delson, *Dudley Murphy, Hollywood Wild Card* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 126. Murphy’s interest in O’Neill would climax with his production of *The Emperor Jones* at Astoria in 1933.

129. “Two-Eyed Camera Gives Movies Depth,” *NYT*, May 25, 1929, 23. See also “Stereoscopic Sound Film Is Completed,” *FD*, May 2, 1929, 1, and “Spoor Third Dimension Demonstrated by RCA,” *FD*, May 26, 1929, 1. The great increase in definition afforded by these and other wide-film processes led to many of them being incorrectly touted as “stereoscopic.”

130. “Leo Meehan, who directed Rudy Vallee in the first film made by the Spoor-Berggren widescreen, three-dimensional [*sic*] process, reports that the rushes are very good. . . .” “*Applesauce, Gay Lady* Are among Films Completed in East,” *MPH*, August 10, 1929, 37.

131. Spoor’s Spectaculum featured a showing of his Niagara Falls film. But in the souvenir catalogue, “The Silver Screen of Tomorrow,” the only image illustrating the great size of the film frame appears to be a clip from *Lady Fingers*. Catalogue courtesy of Carey Williams.

132. “Short Shots,” *FD*, July 31, 1929, 10.

133. See the full-page advertisement in *FD*, August 2, 1929, 5.

134. “20 of 26 Gramercy Shorts Now Completed.”

135. “Photocolor Expansion Program Under Way,” *FD*, September 15, 1929, 6; “Barker Starts Third,” *FD*, September 18, 1929, 3; “Photocolor Progressing at RCA Gramercy Plant,” *FD*, October 2, 1929, 8; “Short Shots,” *FD*, December 15, 1929, 6. Photocolor had its own studio in the old *Cosmopolitan* magazine plant in Irvington, New York, but appears to have shot most of its early films in rented studios. Before the company took space in the Gramercy studio, Basil Smith directed Photocolor’s *Ballet d’amour* with Patricia Bowman and *A Romany Lass* with Pauline Blair at the old De Forest Studio on 48th Street, then known as General Talking Pictures.

136. A. P. Peck, “Movies Take on Color,” *Scientific American*, April 1930, 285.

137. “Acoustic Design Now Problem in Set Making,” *FD*, September 29, 1929, 6; “Engineer Sees Use of Fewer Microphones,” *FD*, November 10, 1929, 8; “Experiment Proves Hard Lights O.K. for Talkies,” *FD*, March 5, 1930, 4. See a photograph of the Gramercy studio interior in *International Photographers Bulletin*, December 1929, 10.

138. “Radio Victor to Make Films at Gramercy Studio,” *FD*, November 11, 1929, 1; “Making Gramercy Studio One of Largest in East,” *FD*, November 22, 1929, 1.

139. *FD*, June 11, 1928, 7, advertisement for Manhattan Studios, offering “motion picture settings on a contractual basis.”

140. “Rambova Co-Starring,” *FD*, June 10, 1928, 2; “Three Units Working at Manhattan Studios,” *FD*, June 21, 1928, 4; “Table of Active Studios,” *FD*, July 1, 1928, 45; “Sound Studios Signs Lease for Manhattan Studios,” *FD*, September 21, 1928, 2. Although the building was still officially the Manhattan Studios, during the time Pathé leased the facility the sign by the door read “Pathé Sound Studios, Inc.” These names were used interchangeably in the trade.

141. “Sound Studios, Inc.,” *FDYBK* (1929), 561; “Staff for Sound Studios Named by Robert Kane,” *FD*, September 24, 1928, 1.

142. “Bert Glennon Arriving,” *FD*, October 7, 1928, 2; “Completing Sound Prologue,” *FD*, October 14, 1928, 6; “Short Shots,” *FD*, November 26, 1928, 2.

143. “FBO Starting Talker,” *FD*, December 17, 1928, 6. The film was in production one month after Paramount’s *The Letter* and at approximately the same time as *The Hole in the Wall*, making it only the second or third all-talking feature made in the East.

144. Crafton, *The Talkies*, 160, is incorrect when he

says that *Syncopation* was made by RKO at its Gower Street studio in Hollywood. A more accurate account can be found in Richard Barrios, *A Song in the Dark* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 86–88.

145. The original plays opened in September 1926 and September 1927, respectively. Official film versions were released in 1929 (*Burlesque* under the title *The Dance of Life*), but not before their plots and characters had been lifted for many behind-the-scenes melodramas.

146. After *Syncopation*, Glennon returned to Hollywood, where he directed a few more low-budget pictures, then resumed his earlier career, photographing such films as *The Scarlet Empress* and *Stagecoach*.

147. “*Mother’s Boy*,” *FD*, May 8, 1929, 1. The prevalence of Morton Downey films at Pathé Sound Studios may be explained by the fact that the tenor was “one of Joseph P. Kennedy’s best friends.” See letter from Mitchell Owens in *New York Times Magazine*, January 13, 2002, 4.

148. “Bennett Film on Coast,” *FD*, May 19, 1929, 10; “Short Shots,” *FD*, July 10, 1929, 8.

149. “Most of Pathé’s Short Stuff Made in the East,” *FD*, September 2, 1929, 10; “Short Film Releases,” *FDYBK* (1929), 378–79.

150. See the full-page advertisement for this release, number 30 in the series, in *FD*, November 21, 1929, 3.

151. “*Applesauce, Gay Lady*.”

152. “Short Shots,” *FD*, October 6, 1929, 7.

153. “*Applesauce, Gay Lady*.” For comparative budget information on these shorts, see “Schedule B. Cost of 1929–30 Comedies as Estimated December 6, 1929,” Pathé Exchange Collection, Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Beverly Hills, CA (hereafter Pathé Exchange Collection).

154. According to the October 26 issue of *Exhibitors Herald-World*, Kane left on the *Isle de France* the previous week (“Paramount to Create Complete Production Center in New York,” 45). He brought over his production manager, Stephen FitzGibbons, and within a few months was employing quite a few of Pathé’s New York cameramen, including Harry Stradling, Ted Pahle, and Phil Tannura (“Former Studio Sound Men with Pathé-Natan Abroad,” *FD*, March 30, 1930, 6). Kane later took charge of Paramount’s European production and was made Chevalier of the Legion of Honor for his contribution to French cinema. Kane’s short biographical entry in *Film Daily Production Guide* (1936), 207–8, is one of the few summaries of this activity. French cinematographer Michel Kelber, who worked with Stradling and other members of Kane’s group, recalled their introduction of American lighting techniques as “a revelation to us.” Colin Crisp, *The Classic French Cinema, 1930–1960* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1997), 383.

155. “Paramount, RCA and Warners Lead Eastern Studio Activity,” *Exhibitors Herald-World*, November 9, 1929, 51.

156. “Fred Lalley in Charge at Pathé Sound Studio,” *FD*, November 3, 1929, 6; “Heavy Production Is Set for Pathé Studio,” *FD*, November 24, 1929, 7.

157. See “Short Shots,” *FD*, January 30, 1929, 9, where Basil Smith is about to begin a series of ten such films featuring anonymous local chorus girls.

158. The following account is taken from “10 Die, 18 Hurt in Film Studio Blaze,” *NYT*, December 11, 1929, 1; “Survivors Dazed at Escape in Fire,” *NYT*, December 11, 1929, 2; “10 Dead, 20 Hurt in Pathé Studio Fire,” *FD*, December 11, 1929, 1.

159. Although the first reports indicated ten fatalities, four months later news reports were referring to eleven deaths, suggesting that another victim might have died of injuries. See “Flynn and Lalley Cleared of Pathé Fire Charges,” *FD*, March 25, 1930, 1.

160. “10 Die, 18 Hurt, in Film Studio Blaze.”

161. *Ibid*.

162. “Eastern Studios Pay Tribute to Fire Dead,” *FD*, December 15, 1929, 1; “Mayor May Preside over Fire Enquiry,” *NYT*, December 13, 1929, 29.

163. “Mayor May Preside over Fire Inquiry”; “Two Pathé Officials in Court Following Probe of Studio Fire,” *FD*, December 13, 1929, 1; “Arrest Pathé Officials on New Violation Charge,” *FD*, December 17, 1929, 3; “Flynn and Lalley Cleared of Pathé Fire Charges.” It should be noted that the film did not burn in this fire.

164. Terry Ramsaye to E. B. Derr, Pathé Studios, Culver City, January 25, 1930. Pathé Exchange Collection.

165. Douglas Fox, “Chevalier’s Chicle Chewing Too Speedy for Producing Schedule,” *Exhibitor’s Herald-World*, January 11, 1930, 40; “Pathé Continues Eastern Production at Ft. Lee,” *FD*, January 8, 1930, 1.

166. “George Le Maire, Pathé Producer, Dies in N.Y.,” *FD*, January 21, 1930, 1.

167. Information from Thelma White, who appeared in both versions of the film. Interview by Ron Hutchinson, as related to the author.

168. “Eastern Production Is Slowly Being Revived,” *FD*, February 23, 1930, 6.

169. “Studios Oppose Fire Rule Due to Expenses Involved,” *FD*, April 22, 1930, 7.

170. “Urge Mayor to Aid Production in East,” *FD*, April 25, 1930, 1; “Says Mayor Realizes Need of Encouraging Industry,” *FD*, May 2, 1930, 2.

## Chapter 6: Paramount Speaks

1. “Hollywood Holds Film Colony,” *Publix Opinion*, June 30, 1928, 1 (the title of the article refers to the fact that only part of Paramount’s production would move east); Jesse Lasky, *I Blow My Own Horn* (London: Victor Golancz, 1957), 197.

2. “Wanger to Be Boss of ‘Talkies,’” *Publix Opinion*, June 11, 1928, 4.

3. Howard T. Lewis, *The Motion Picture Industry* (New York: Van Nostrand, 1933), 109–10.

4. Paramount produced a special series of eight filmed trailers designed to promote these live touring shows. The behind-the-scenes films were shot at the Paramount Theatre and various scenic shops and rehearsal spaces. Frank Cambria, Nathaniel Finston, John Murray Anderson, and other members of the creative team were featured. “Production Pictures Ready,” *Publix Opinion*, May 29, 1927, 1.

5. “Paramount, with Big Program, Definitely Committed to Sound,” *Exhibitors Herald and Moving Picture World*, August 18, 1928, 34.

6. “Big Names in Talkies Shorts,” *Publix Opinion*, December 8, 1928, 11.



7. “Paramount Talking Acts,” *Paramount 1929–1930 Campaign Book*, unpaginated, in the collection of the Museum of the Moving Image, Astoria, NY.

8. For example, Lewis Jacobs cites Monta Bell as one of the “circle of younger directors . . . modeling their efforts on Lubitsch’s” in *The Rise of the American Film: A Critical History* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1939), 357. Today there are no books or monographs on Bell’s career, and he is usually omitted from even the most comprehensive film encyclopedias.

9. Monta Bell, “The Director: His Problems and Qualifications,” *Theatre Arts Monthly* (September 1929), reprinted in Richard Koszarski, ed., *Hollywood Directors, 1914–1941* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), 228.

10. See Robert Florey, *Hollywood d’hier et d’aujourd’hui* (Paris: Editions Prisma, 1948), esp. 146–59.

11. For a discussion of Florey’s status as an experimentalist, see Brian Taves, “Robert Florey and the Hollywood Avant-Garde,” in *Lovers of Cinema: The First American Film Avant-Garde, 1919–1945*, ed. Jan-Christopher Horak (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1995), 94–117.

12. George Folsey interviewed by Irene Kahn Atkins, April 24, 1979, collection of the Museum of the Moving Image, Astoria, NY.

13. Richard and Diane Koszarski, “‘No Problems. They Liked What They Saw on Screen’: An Interview with Joseph Ruttenberg,” *Film History* 1, no. 1 (1987), 77 (hereafter Koszarski, “Interview with Ruttenberg”).

14. *Ibid.*

15. “Paramount L.I. Studio Fully Transformed,” *FD*, April 20, 1930, 4.

16. Walter Wanger quoted in Bernard Rosenberg and Harry Silverstein, *The Real Tinsel* (New York: Macmillan, 1970), 95. The problems with climate control at Astoria were remarkable; the Fox-Case Movietone studio had been air-conditioned since it opened two years earlier.

17. Florey, *Hollywood*, 147.

18. “Big Names in Talkies Shorts”; *Night Club* press book, Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts (hereafter Billy Rose Collection, NYPL). It is unclear why these first two films were produced under the auspices of local theatrical charities. With the actors donating their services, perhaps Wanger saw an opportunity to continue the studio’s technical shakedown at no risk to Paramount.

19. “*Night Club*,” *FD*, September 15, 1929, 13. There is no way to evaluate these films today. *Night Club* survives only in a condensed reissue called *Broadway Nights*; whether it was “a jumbled mess” or another of Florey’s experiments is impossible to say. *The Pusher-in-the-Face*, despite its Fitzgerald association and presence in the 16mm market as late as 1940, is also unavailable.

20. “Silent and Sound Films,” *NYT*, August 12, 1929, 22.

21. “Progress in Talkies Is Tremendous,” *Public Opinion*, December 22, 1928, 3.

22. Bert Granet interviewed by Irene Kahn Atkins, April 6, 1979, collection of the Museum of the Moving Image, Astoria, NY. The master recordings were taken to the Victor plant in Camden for processing, then rushed back to Astoria for synchronization.

23. “Jean De Limur,” *Motion Picture Almanac* (1933), 121; Matthew Bernstein, *Walter Wanger, Hollywood Independent* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 30–33.

24. Folsey interviewed by Atkins.

25. *Ibid.*

26. *Ibid.*

27. *Ibid.*

28. “Queer Screen Sounds,” *NYT*, November 4, 1928, 122.

29. Ralph Townsend quoted in “Progress in Talkies Is Tremendous.”

30. *Ibid.*

31. Richard Watts Jr., “*The Letter*,” *New York Herald-Tribune*, undated clipping, Billy Rose Collection, NYPL.

32. Mordaunt Hall, “*The Letter*,” *NYT*, March 8, 1929, 34. Hall also devoted a large portion of his review to complimenting the technical quality of the sound recording, especially the progress made in the reproduction of sibilants.

33. Quoted in Robert Osborne, *Academy Awards Illustrated: A Complete History of Hollywood’s Academy Awards in Words and Pictures* (Los Angeles: Marvin Miller, 1965), 16.

34. “Jeanne Eagels Will Be Buried in Kansas City,” *FD*, October 6, 1929, 1. Eagels was about to begin work on a third Astoria production, *The Laughing Lady*; Ruth Chatterton was sent out from the West Coast to take over the role. It is part of the ill luck of East Coast film history that no prints of *Jealousy* are known to exist; *The Letter*, long overshadowed by the William Wyler remake, survives through a single degraded copy in the Library of Congress.

35. “Big Names in Talkies Shorts”; “Three Writers Join Paramount Staff for Talking Shorts,” *Exhibitors Herald and Moving Picture World*, December 8, 1928, 46.

36. Florey, *Hollywood*, 152–53. What is even more amazing is that Florey persuaded Chevalier to make this film for free, as a promotional exercise.

37. “*Hole in the Wall* Started,” *FD*, December 7, 1928, 2.

38. Robinson had appeared opposite Richard Barthelmess in *The Bright Shawl* in 1923, Colbert in Frank Capra’s *For the Love of Mike* in 1927, both films made in the East by First National.

39. Edith Tarrent, “The \$97 Masterpiece,” *Motion Picture Classic*, August 1928, 40, is a good example of the attention Florey was getting at this time, even from the fan magazines, for his stylistic experiments.

40. Florey, *Hollywood*, 154; “Paramount Erecting Auxiliary Building at Eastern Sound Plant,” *Exhibitors Herald and Moving Picture World*, December 29, 1928, 57.

41. “Paramount Doubles Equipment at Long Island Studio,” *Exhibitors Herald-World*, January 12, 1929.

42. “Short Shots,” *FD*, February 28, 1929, 32.

43. “Signs 3 Year Contract,” *Exhibitors Herald-World*, January 26, 1929, 26.

44. This was not the first time the Marx Brothers appeared on screen, although their silent film career is more properly the stuff of legend. In addition to the previously discussed *Humor Risk* in 1921, Harpo took a small role in Paramount’s *Too Many Kisses* (noted in

the press book for this film, Billy Rose Collection, NYPL), and Herbert (Zeppo) was reported to have appeared briefly in Frank Tuttle's *A Kiss in the Dark* ("Eclipse Inspired *A Kiss in the Dark*," *ETR*, February 14, 1925). Both films were shot in Astoria.

45. Donald Crafton, *The Talkies: American Cinema's Transition to Sound, 1926–1931* (New York: Scribner's, 1997), 204.

46. Harpo Marx, *Harpo Speaks* (New York: Freeway Press, 1974), 270; Florey, *Hollywood*, 156.

47. Marx, *Harpo Speaks*, 270.

48. *Ibid.*, 271.

49. Groucho Marx and Richard Anobile, *The Marx Bros. Scrapbook* (New York: Darien House, 1973), 111; Folsey interviewed by Atkins.

50. Florey, *Hollywood*, 157.

51. Folsey interviewed by Atkins.

52. Marx and Anobile, *Marx Bros. Scrapbook*, 111. As Anobile is about to suggest that Florey was a competent English speaker, Groucho interrupts, "He may speak perfect English now, but I'm talking about over forty years ago."

53. For example, in his discussion of the film's musical numbers in *Groucho, Harpo, Chico and Sometimes Zeppo: A History of the Marx Brothers and a Satire on the Rest of the World* (New York: Touchstone, 1973), 98–99, all Joe Adamson says is that Irving Berlin had no hit song in this film.

54. Walter Wanger quoted in Rosenberg and Silverstein, *Real Tinsel*, 97.

55. Robert Florey quoted in Marx and Anobile, *Marx Bros. Scrapbook*, 116.

56. Folsey interviewed by Atkins.

57. "It is indeed a filmed play in the worst sense of the word. Or words. The play isn't even filmed very well." Adamson, *Groucho, Harpo, Chico*, 88.

58. Rosenberg and Silverstein, *Real Tinsel*, 97. But Florey, *Hollywood*, 156, claimed that the film was a great success at the preview, registering four hundred laughs.

59. Walter Wanger quoted in Rosenberg and Silverstein, *Real Tinsel*, 96.

60. "Ziegfeld Signs to Produce a Series of Paramount Pictures," *MPW*, June 27, 1925, 950; Barry Paris, *Louise Brooks* (New York: Knopf, 1989), 175; "Selected to Direct Ziegfeld Production," *MPW*, August 21, 1926, 1.

61. Even in the silent period there were few East Coast Technicolor features. Fox's *The Joy Girl* (1927) and Paramount's *The King on Main Street, Stage Struck*, and *The American Venus* incorporated Technicolor sequences.

62. "Eastern Studio Produced Pictures Again Playing on Broadway," *Exhibitors Herald-World*, April 27, 1929, 44. At Astoria, Webb had recently completed *Gentlemen of the Press*, a modest talkie intended as a feature-film screen test for Walter Huston and Kay Francis.

63. Richard Barrios, *A Song in the Dark: The Birth of the Musical Film* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 197.

64. Douglas Fox, "Fugitive Sun Adds Difficulties to Outdoor Sound Sequences," *Exhibitors Herald-World*, May 18, 1929, 38; Douglas Fox, "Sound Glorifies Extras, Too," *Exhibitors Herald-World*, June 8, 1929, 39.

65. One studio veteran remembered that the inability of the early Technicolor process to distinguish between certain colors made it appear that some of the performers in a "bathing beauty" number were nude, forcing it to be scrapped. Bert Granet interviewed by Irene Kahn Atkins, April 6, 1979, collection of the Museum of the Moving Image, Astoria, NY. Perhaps this included the footage of Johnny Weissmuller as Adonis, visible only as a flash in existing prints. Weissmuller had been recruited for the film by Harkrider and was featured in the film's publicity. See *Glorifying the American Girl*, press book, Billy Rose Collection, NYPL.

66. John S. Cohen Jr., "Glorifying the American Girl," *New York Sun*, January 11, 1930, clipping in Billy Rose Collection, NYPL.

67. "Short Shots," *FD*, March 15, 1929, 14. Also in the cast were Brian Donlevy and the young John Huston, making his first screen appearance.

68. Douglas Fox, "New York Bidding for Limelight as Sound Production Center," *Exhibitors Herald-World*, June 15, 1929, B6. The listing of Bea Lillie was clearly some kind of error, but also an indication that the studio was not losing any sleep over this project.

69. Florey, *Hollywood*, 158.

70. For example, a *New York World* article dated July 19, 1929, five weeks into production, still lists the two men as co-directors. Untitled clipping, Billy Rose Collection, NYPL. Another report, "Bell to Direct Two and Supervise Three at Astoria," *Exhibitors Herald-World*, July 20, 1929, 83, lists only Meehan as the director.

71. "[*The Battle of Paris*]," *Pittsburgh Post*, December 21, 1929, clipping in Billy Rose Collection, NYPL. Lawrence had already appeared in shorts for Fox Movietone.

72. "The players and the directors, John Meehan and Robert Florey, have been getting a break by having their calls at night, thus getting away from the terrific heat New York has experienced this week." *New York World*, July 19, 1929, untitled clipping, Billy Rose Collection, NYPL. Florey, *Hollywood*, 158–59.

73. James Silke, ed., *Rouben Mamoulian: "Style Is the Man"* (Washington, DC: American Film Institute, 1971), 6.

74. Florey, *Hollywood*, 155–56.

75. Rouben Mamoulian interviewed by Joe Adamson, June 15 and November 23, 1979, collection of the Museum of the Moving Image, Astoria, NY.

76. Quoted in Raymond Rohauer, *Rouben Mamoulian* (New York: Gallery of Modern Art, 1967), 3.

77. Mamoulian interviewed by Adamson.

78. "Cameras Turning in East," *Exhibitors Herald-World*, May 4, 1929, 33; Fox, "New York Bidding for Limelight."

79. Bell, "The Director," 231.

80. Andrew Sarris, *Hollywood Voices: Interviews with Film Directors* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1971), 63.

81. Silke, ed., *Rouben Mamoulian*, 7.

82. Mamoulian interviewed by Adamson.

83. See "Sound Perspective Used in *Applause*," *FD*, September 15, 1929, 6, for a contemporary account of this innovation.

84. The third channel was added in February 1929, two more, one of them restricted to dubbing and



scoring, some time later. "Paramount L.I. Studio Fully Transformed," 4. In addition to the two features, the studio was simultaneously filming an elaborate short, *You're in the Army Now*. "Production Begins," *Exhibitors Herald-World*, June 29, 1929, 152.

85. Silke, ed., *Rouben Mamoulian*, 10.

86. Mamoulian interviewed by Adamson.

87. Douglas Fox, "Paramount Making Two Audiences at Once at Eastern Studio," *Exhibitors Herald-World*, June 22, 1929, 124.

88. "Production Begins," 152.

89. Caroline Gutknecht interviewed by Richard Koszarski, June 27, 1979, collection of the Museum of the Moving Image, Astoria, NY.

90. Folsey interviewed by Atkins.

91. Mamoulian interviewed by Adamson.

92. Douglas Fox, "*Applesauce* [sic] and *Gay Lady* Are among Films Completed in East," *Exhibitors Herald-World*, August 10, 1929, 37. *The Gay Lady* was the working title of *The Battle of Paris*.

93. *Applause* press book, Billy Rose Collection, NYPL. This approach supplanted an earlier publicity angle that played off obsolete sexual stereotypes. In the style of 1910, "52 buxom beauties" had been hired as chorus girls, but they were not allowed to rehearse on the upstairs stages, it was said, because the floor might not support their weight ("Paramount Making Two Audiences"). The audience for their performance was said to consist of four hundred bald-headed men (the period equivalent of a trench-coat brigade), whose shiny "domes" caused problems with lighting and makeup ("Bell to Direct Two"). In the film, Mamoulian is especially cruel to this "bald head row," but treats the women rather more gently.

94. "No Cutting Is Required in Negative Produced by New Paramount Director," *Exhibitors Herald-World*, August 24, 1929, 39. E. A. Dupont's *Variety*, produced by the German UFA studio, had been distributed by Paramount in 1926.

95. Silke, ed., *Rouben Mamoulian*, 7.

96. See, for example, Edward Wood, "They Call It Art," *Picture Show*, May 23, 1925, 10, 15, where *Greed*, *The Salvation Hunters*, and *Isn't Life Wonderful* are attacked for showing "the miserable and the sordid side" of life.

97. Martin J. Quigley, "Echoes of *Applause*," *Exhibitors Herald-World*, October 19, 1929, 18.

98. Mamoulian interviewed by Adamson.

99. "The Ten Biggest Motion Picture News Events of 1929," *FDYBK* (1930), K.

100. "John Butler Resigns as Paramount L.I. Manager," *Exhibitors Herald-World*, July 20, 1929, 47; "Bell to Direct Two"; "*Applesauce* and *Gay Lady* Are among Films Completed in East."

101. Folsey interviewed by Atkins.

102. Joseph Ruttenberg interviewed by Irene Kahn Atkins, May 14, 1979, collection of the Museum of the Moving Image, Astoria, NY.

103. "Bell to Direct Two."

104. Monta Bell, "Directing Sound Pictures," in Oliver Saylor, *Revolt in the Arts: A Survey of the Creation, Distribution and Appreciation of Art in America* (New York: Brentano's, 1930), 231.

105. "Speed Sound Production at Paramount L.I.

Plant," *FD*, November 30, 1928, 7; "Short Shots," *FD*, March 15, 1929, 14.

106. "Short Shots," *FD*, December 8, 1929, 7.

107. The woman had collapsed onto his sofa in a drunken stupor and was strangled by her own pearl necklace. Murphy was not charged but did have to leave New York in order to continue his movie career, at least until 1933. Susan Delson, *Dudley Murphy, Hollywood Wild Card* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 100–103.

108. "Paramount L.I. Studio Fully Transformed," 4.

109. "Short Shots," *FD*, January 12, 1930, 4; "New York Bidding for Limelight as Sound Production Center." When Anderson was hired by Universal to direct *King of Jazz*, rights to "The Melting Pot," which the studio hoped to use as a high point of the picture, had to be acquired from Paramount.

110. Henry Jenkins, *What Made Pistachio Nuts? Early Sound Comedy and the Vaudeville Aesthetic* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), has a good discussion of this phenomenon but limits the effectiveness of his argument by ignoring short films almost completely.

111. In *Mother's Boy*, shot a year earlier, Irishman Morton Downey's Lower East Side employers refer to him as not only a *schmorrer* but also a *gonif*, aspersions he both recognizes and resents.

112. "Paramount to Create Complete Production Center in New York," *Exhibitors Herald-World*, October 26, 1929, 45.

113. It was also quietly announced at this time that Walter Wanger's office was being moved out of the Paramount Building and over to the Astoria studio, not a good sign. "Short Shots," *FD*, September 8, 1929, 6.

114. Jack Allicoate, "Short Subjects," *FD*, February 24, 1930, 1.

115. "Paramount Shorts Win Wide Acclaim," *Public Opinion*, September 5, 1930, 1.

116. Blumenstock was originally the studio's Chief Title Writer. He prepared silent versions of films like *The Letter*, *Gentlemen of the Press*, and *The Battle of Paris* for theaters not yet wired for sound, then was promoted to the short-film department. "Short Shots," *FD*, April 7, 1929, 7. A year later the studio was still issuing silent versions. Emma Hill prepared both silent and sound versions of *The Big Pond* and *Young Man of Manhattan*. "Short Shots," *FD*, April 15, 1930, 7.

117. "Shorts Used as Test for Broadway Talent," *FD*, July 6, 1930, 5.

118. "Universal Demand for Sound Shorts Spurs Producers to Capacity Work," *Exhibitors Daily Review*, August 9, 1930, 3; "Paramount Completes Majority of 1930–31 Short Subjects List," *Exhibitors Daily Review*, September 20, 1930, 15.

119. "New Record Program Planned at L.I. Studio," *FD*, January 11, 1931, 5.

120. "Paramount Shifting Some New York Feature Production West," *FD*, May 28, 1931, 1; "Paramount Adds New Musical Shorts," *MPD*, June 2, 1931.

121. "More Exteriors Planned for Paramount Shorts," *FD*, February 22, 1931, 5; "Paramount Schedules 20 Slapstick Comedies," *MPD*, June 30, 1931; "Cast Opposite Sterling," *MPD*, August 12, 1931. Al Ray, a slapstick specialist, was brought over from Warners' Vitaphone studio to direct these films.

122. "Short Shots," *FD*, February 14, 1932, 5.
123. The handful of earlier shorts featuring black performers included *After Seben* (1929) and two with George Dewey Washington, a favorite on the Publix Theatre circuit.
124. Graham McCann, *Cary Grant: A Class Apart* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 50.
125. "Paramount Adds Annex," *FD*, April 15, 1930, 7. This figure excludes lab employees.
126. "Paramount to Develop Miniature Hollywood in Queens," *Queensboro*, March 1930, 130, 132, 138. See also "Folsey Finds Work of Cameraman Doubled," *FD*, October 13, 1929, 10, and the associated list of Astoria camera crews.
127. All departmental figures are from "Paramount to Develop Miniature Hollywood in Queens."
128. Sautler's work is almost completely unknown to film historians but deserves examination. See "Building Sets for Sound Presents New Problems," *FD*, December 15, 1929, 6, where he describes acoustical problems that have to be considered by set designers and asserts that, because the new incandescent lamps are "too mellow" compared with arc lights, scenery artists must now paint tonal contrasts onto the walls of sets.
129. Trade paper notices indicate that, under Sautler's supervision, Ernst Fegte designed *Animal Crackers*, *Laughter*, *The Royal Family of Broadway*, *The Girl Habit*, and (with Hans Dreier) *The Smiling Lieutenant*; Charles Kirk designed *Jealousy*, *The Battle of Paris*, *Queen High*, *Honor Among Lovers*, *Personal Maid*, and *Wayward*; Sam Corso designed *Stolen Heaven* and *Secrets of a Secretary*. Scognamiglio appears to have worked mainly on shorts.
130. "Sound and Garments," *NYT*, September 9, 1928, 115.
131. *Jealousy*, press book, Billy Rose Collection, NYPL.
132. *Film Daily Production Guide* (1930).
133. Vernon Duke, *Passport to Paris* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1955), 238.
134. "Jay Gorney," *Motion Picture Almanac* (1931), 432.
135. "John W. Green," *Motion Picture Almanac* (1931), 432; "Johnny Green," in Colin Larkin, *The Encyclopedia of Popular Music*, 3rd ed. (New York: MUZE UK Ltd., 1998), 2270. Green appears with Ethel Merman in the Fleischer cartoon *Song Shopping* (1933).
136. "Short Shots," *FD*, September 14, 1931, 4.
137. "Duke Vernon [i.e., Vernon Duke]," *Motion Picture Almanac* (1931), 434; Stanley Green, *The World of Musical Comedy: The Story of the American Musical Stage* (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1960), 199–204; "Paramount Using Music to Supplement Dialogue," *FD*, April 5, 1931, 5; Duke, *Passport to Paris*, 241.
138. Johnny Green interviewed by Irene Kahn Atkins, September 17, 1976, collection of the Museum of the Moving Image, Astoria, NY.
139. "Paramount Ready to Produce Wide Pictures Via Magnafilm," *FD*, July 19, 1929, 1; "Paramount Has New Full Stage Projection; Wide Film Is Used," *Exhibitors Herald-World*, July 27, 1929, 19. A frame from *You're in the Army Now* can be seen in Brian Coe, *The History of Movie Photography* (Westfield, NJ: Eastview Editions, 1981), 145.
140. Jesse Lasky, *I Blow My Own Horn* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1957), 183–85.
141. "Short Shots," *FD*, November 16, 1930, 5; "Engineers to Visit Paramount Studio," *Exhibitors Daily Review*, December 5, 1930. Miniature golf was thought to be attracting audiences away from film theaters; accordingly, the film's sarcastic working title was *The New Religion*.
142. Jesse Lasky claimed that the 65mm cameras were mothballed, then in 1953 sold to Mike Todd, who used them on his Todd-AO production *Oklahoma*. Lasky, *I Blow My Own Horn*, 186.
143. "Paramount to Develop Miniature Hollywood in Queens."
144. Folsey interviewed by Atkins. It may just be a coincidence, but the only original Ernst Lubitsch negative from this period to have survived to the modern era is that of *The Smiling Lieutenant*. Charles Hopkins, "The Smiling Lieutenant," *UCLA Film & Television Archive Second Annual Festival of Preservation* (1989), program note for July 16.
145. The figure of 231 comes from an analysis of production numbers assigned to shorts known to have been made at Astoria during this period; because of production exigencies, it may not be an exact figure.
146. In *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson argue that, as far as content and style are concerned, all pre-1960 American films adhere to a specific model that can be identified with Hollywood production practice. But like other historians writing before and since, they are clearly not aware of the degree of production taking place in the East during this period, nor the peculiar circumstances of production that often operated there.
147. Mamoulian interviewed by Adamson.
148. Kenneth Tynan, "The Girl in the Black Helmet," *The New Yorker*, June 11, 1979, 47.
149. "Paramount Set for *Royal Family*," *Exhibitors Daily Review*, August 12, 1930, 3.
150. George Cukor interviewed by Joe Adamson, collection of the Museum of the Moving Image, Astoria, NY.
151. Quoted in Lee Margulies, "Tribute to Dorothy Arzner," *Action* 10, no. 2 (March–April 1975), 15.
152. Tynan, "Girl in the Black Helmet," 47.
153. Saverio Giovacchini, in *Hollywood Modernism: Film and Politics in the Age of the New Deal* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001), suggests that the climate in Hollywood changed rather suddenly after the introduction of sound due to the arrival of many New York literary exiles and European political refugees.
154. Frank Condon, "Over the Bridge to the Movies," *Saturday Evening Post*, January 16, 1932, 31.
155. Edward Dmytryk, *It's a Hell of a Life, But Not a Bad Living* (New York: Times Books, 1978), 21.
156. Although Dean received sole screen credit, the *Exhibitors Herald-World* reported that "it isn't any secret that [Morton] Blumenstock sat in with Basil Dean . . . and instructed that distinguished gentleman and excellent director of legitimate work in the A-B-C's of talking pictures." "A Bit Quiet on the Eastern Front," November 2, 1929, 45. Blumenstock was promoted

to director of short films in consequence of his work here.

157. Clive Brook quoted in Jon Tuska, *The Detective in Hollywood* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1978), 8.

158. "Lasky Home with Script, Picture Rights, and Tenor," *Exhibitors Herald-World*, May 25, 1929, 24.

159. Paramount was so successful in giving *The Return of Sherlock Holmes* the feel of a British picture that compilers of *The American Film Institute Catalog, Feature Films 1921–1930* failed to include it, assuming that it was a foreign production.

160. "28 Audiens Keep Paramount's 16 Sound Stages Going at Full Blast," *MPH*, August 31, 1929, 44; "Short Shots," *FD*, September 13, 1929, 3.

161. Richard Watts Jr., "[*The Laughing Lady*]," *NYHT*, January 4, 1930, clipping in Billy Rose Collection, NYPL.

162. "Paramount Starts Clive Brook Story," *Exhibitors Herald-World*, August 5, 1929, 51; "Breakdown in Fight of Equity Stimulates Eastern Production," *Exhibitors Herald-World*, August 31, 1929, 55. When *Applause* was filming earlier that summer, Equity pulled one actor in the middle of production, forcing some ingenious rewriting to explain action for which he was responsible. Mamoulian interviewed by Adamson.

163. "Increased Activity at L.I. Studio Planned," *FD*, September 8, 1929, 1.

164. Another clue might be found in one trade paper critic's surprisingly catty reference to her in *Dangerous Nan McGrew* as "plump." Douglas Fox, "Another Sequence Being Added to *The Big Pond* by Paramount," *Exhibitors Herald-World*, March 15, 1930, 34.

165. "Singer Given Role in Ed Wynne [*sic*] Film," *Exhibitors Daily Review*, August 11, 1930, 3. Merman had just finished her first short and was put right into *Follow the Leader*, which was already in production.

166. "Short Shots," *FD*, August 23, 1930, 5; "Miriam Hopkins Signs Paramount Contract," *Exhibitors Daily Review*, September 6, 1930, 11.

167. Fox, "Another Sequence Being Added to *The Big Pond*."

168. "Sound Held Adapted to Technique of Camera," *FD*, September 8, 1929, 6.

169. *Gentlemen of the Press*, press book, Billy Rose Collection, NYPL. Possibly 230 feet was intended.

170. Edward G. Robinson, *All My Yesterdays* (New York: Hawthorne, 1973), 101.

171. "How to Hide 'Mike' Big Problem with Sound Men," *FD*, March 30, 1930, 6.

172. "Install Additional Sound Channels at L.I. Studio," *FD*, March 23, 1930, 9; "New Sound Channel," *FD*, June 8, 1930, 5.

173. "Four Players to Appear in Two Versions of Paramount Picture," *Exhibitors Herald-World*, December 14, 1929, 38; *The Big Pond* press book, Billy Rose Collection, NYPL.

174. Douglas Fox, "Multi-Lingual Profits Up 5-Fold as Costs Increase Only 2-Fold," *Exhibitors Herald-World*, February 8, 1930, 36.

175. Other features were announced as bilingual productions but never released that way. For example, Dorothy Arzner's *Honor Among Lovers*, starring Colbert and Fredric March, was promoted as a bilingual feature as late as one day before the start of shooting.

"*Sex in Business* Begins Rehearsals," *Exhibitors Daily Review*, December 11, 1930. There were also a few multiple-language shorts, including *Actions Speak Louder than Words/Palabras y obras*, directed by Monte Brice, with Cesar Romero.

176. This total includes films produced on the West Coast. "Paramount L.I. Studio Fully Transformed." A year later this dubbing activity had been replaced by subtitling in such languages as Spanish, Portuguese, Dutch, and Japanese. "Paramount's New York Studio Turning Out Foreign Versions," *FD*, November 16, 1931, 1.

177. "Paramount at Astoria offered me a thousand dollars a week to write a script for a Maurice Chevalier film called *The Big Pond*. I turned it in in two weeks and picked up two thousand dollars. I learned later that the picture company had assumed a ten-week writing period and a tab of ten thousand dollars." *Preston Sturges by Preston Sturges*, ed. Sandy Sturges (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1990), 253.

178. "Filming both language versions of the story, Chevalier is also slated to masticate in French." Douglas Fox, "Chevalier's Chic Chewing Too Speedy for Producing Schedule," *Exhibitors Herald-World*, January 11, 1930, 40.

179. See, for example, "Warners and Publix May Install Miniature Golf," *FD*, July 22, 1930, 1. Fox had done so already.

180. "Paramount Buys Additional Land for L.I. Studio," *Exhibitors Daily Review*, August 6, 1930, 1.

181. Richard Meryman, *Mank: The Wit, World, and Life of Herman Mankiewicz* (New York: William Morrow, 1978), 138–39.

182. "Box Office Receipts Prove Success of Talkies, Says Lasky," *Exhibitors Daily Review*, August 29, 1930, 1.

183. "Para Executives Arrive to Discuss Increased Output," *Exhibitors Daily Review*, October 15, 1930.

184. "D'Arrast Returning to Direct Para Film," *Exhibitors Daily Review*, December 13, 1930. For an outline of D'Arrast's truncated career (he spent his last years as a gambler in Monte Carlo), see Herman G. Weinberg, *Saint Cinema: Selected Writings, 1929–1970* (New York: DBS Publications, 1970), 306–22.

185. "Monta Bell Resigns from Paramount Studio Post," *FD*, May 4, 1930, 1. See the photo of Mankiewicz on the *Laughter* set in Meryman, *Mank*.

186. Anders, a stage actor who appeared in very few films, starred in the original Broadway production of *Strange Interlude*. He is probably best remembered as the duplicitous lawyer Grisby in Orson Welles's *The Lady from Shanghai* (1947).

187. Untitled clipping, *New York Post*, December 23, 1936, Billy Rose Collection, NYPL.

188. "Production in the East," *FD*, September 16, 1930, 1.

189. "Paramount Lets Out 50 from New York Studios," *FD*, September 22, 1930, 1; "Paramount N.Y. Studio Laying Off for 2 Weeks," *FD*, October 7, 1930, 1.

190. "Paramount Officials Coming East to Increase Production"; "Para New York Studio to Play Bigger Role," *FD*, February 15, 1931, 1; "Assign Seven Para Directors in East," *MPD*, April 10, 1931.

191. "Lens and Mike," *MPD*, May 21, 1931, claims

that “about one-third” of *The Girl Habit* was shot in New Hyde Park, a remarkably high percentage for a feature in this period.

192. “Short Shots,” *FD*, April 12, 1931, 28. March had previously come East for one film, *Jealousy*, in 1929.

193. “Short Shots,” *FD*, April 19, 1931, 5. The press books for Bankhead’s Astoria films are unusually informative on the range of jewels, clothes, hats, and shoes she wears in each picture (Billy Rose Collection, NYPL).

194. Quoted in John Kobal, *People Will Talk* (New York: Knopf, 1986), 672.

195. Cukor interviewed by Adamson.

196. Mordaunt Hall, “*Tarnished Lady*,” *NYT*, April 30, 1931, 29.

197. Folsey interviewed by Atkins.

198. Williams left the studio soon after and worked as a second cameraman for Fox on the West Coast; he failed to establish himself in Hollywood and quickly returned to New York. “Short Shots,” *FD*, September 16, 1931, 4.

199. Regina Crewe, “[*Tarnished Lady*],” *New York American*, undated clipping, Billy Rose Collection, NYPL. Or as the *Times* critic more simply put it, the film was “none too well photographed.” Hall, “*Tarnished Lady*.”

200. George Abbott, *Mister Abbott* (New York: Random House, 1963), 146.

201. In the earlier versions, this villain was first Japanese (changed to Burmese for subsequent reissue) and then Indian. The 1931 version, in an early example of political correctness, made him an American fascinated with the rituals of the Orient.

202. Folsey interviewed by Atkins. Who was directing? Folsey cites Berthold Viertel as director of this scene. George Abbott, although he received credit and is visible in some production photographs, never mentions the film in his autobiography. He does claim that he asked to be released from his last (unnamed) Astoria film after it fell behind schedule. *Mr. Abbott*, 146.

203. John Springer, “Nancy Carroll,” *Films in Review* 7, no. 4 (April 1956), 157–63.

204. “[*The Night Angel*],” *NYT*, June 11, 1931, 28.

205. “First Portable Sound Camera Working at Paramount,” *FD*, March 9, 1930, 6 (the film was *Dangerous Nan McGrew*); “Blimps Preferred,” *FD*, October 19, 1930, 5.

206. Springer, “Nancy Carroll,” 160.

207. In fact, Carole Lombard had once been sent to Astoria, for a supporting role in Miriam Hopkins’s *Fast and Loose*.

208. Press accounts detail his activities from his arrival on October 14 through at least April 10, when he is still working on postproduction of *The Smiling Lieutenant*.

209. Folsey interviewed by Atkins. Lubitsch’s lack of involvement in the work of others should have been a warning; nevertheless, between February 1935 and February 1936 he would serve as Paramount’s head of production, with unpleasant consequences. Scott Eyman, *Ernst Lubitsch: Laughter in Paradise* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1993), 225–41.

210. “Jannings to Return to Paramount Fold,” *MPD*, January 9, 1931.

211. “Playwright to Do Chevalier’s Next,” *Exhibitors Daily Review*, November 26, 1930.

212. “Strauss [*sic*] at Paramount,” *MPD*, April 9, 1931.

213. Jack Burton, *The Blue Book of Hollywood Musicals* (Watkins Glen, NY: Century House, 1953), 24–42.

214. According to Eyman, *Ernst Lubitsch*, 169, “the wrong girl gets the man.”

215. “Para’s Biggest Set,” *FD*, February 22, 1931, 5. Dreier seems to have contributed the same doors, staircases, and overdecorated bedchambers that he designed for Lubitsch in *The Love Parade* (1929).

216. The film was simultaneously produced in a French version, *Le lieutenant souriant*, with Jacques Bataille-Henri again assisting, as well as a silent version and a separate “English speaking” version for the United Kingdom. “3 Extra Versions Made on *Smiling Lieutenant*,” *FD*, May 28, 1931, 7.

217. Quoted, along with other extremely favorable reviews, in Herman G. Weinberg, *The Lubitsch Touch: A Critical Study* (New York: Dutton, 1969), 116.

218. “Paramount Wage Cut World-Wide in Scope,” *MPD*, May 22, 1931; “Report Para. Cutting Down N.Y. Production,” *MPD*, May 28, 1931; “Paramount Shifting Some New York Feature Production West,” *FD*, May 28, 1931, 1.

219. “Fingerlin Heads Exodus from Paramount Studio,” *FD*, June 1, 1931, 1; “Short Shots,” *FD*, June 17, 1931, 11.

220. “See Schulberg Victor in P.P. Studio Rivalry,” *MPD*, June 5, 1931.

221. “Lasky Calls Wanger Eastern Studio ‘Genius,’” *FD*, May 8, 1931, 1.

222. “Wanger Out at Para., States ‘Herald’ Yarn,” *MPD*, June 9, 1931.

223. “Cooper in East,” *MPD*, July 11, 1931.

224. “Short Shots,” *FD*, September 16, 1931, 4; “Paramount Studio Changes,” *FD*, September 23, 1931, 2; “Larry Kent Improved,” *FD*, November 2, 1931, 2.

225. “Eastern Studios Active,” *FD*, September 6, 1931, 16.

226. Fred Zinnemann, *A Life in the Movies* (New York: Scribner’s, 1992), 27.

227. “Para. to Close Down Eastern Lot Tuesday,” *MPD*, February 24, 1932.

228. “Paramount Winds Up Its Short Subject Program,” *FD*, March 27, 1932, 6.

229. “Short Shots,” *FD*, February 21, 1932, 5.

230. Eyman, *Lubitsch*, 184–87.

231. Ruttenberg interviewed by Atkins.

232. “Para. Eastern Studio Placed on the Market,” *FD*, March 10, 1932, 1.

233. Adolph Zukor, Columbia University Oral History Project, October 1953. Unedited transcript, Zukor Collection, Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Beverly Hills, CA.

## Chapter 7: Talkies for Everyone

1. “Talker Cause of Many New Companies in N.Y.,” *FD*, October 11, 1929, 8.

2. See, for example, Gene Fernett, *Hollywood’s Poverty Row, 1930–1950* (Satellite Beach, FL: Coral Reef Publications, 1973).



3. "Synchronization Started on F-N's *Lilac Time*," *FD*, June 7, 1928, 8.
4. Matt Bernstein, *Walter Wanger, Hollywood Independent* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 63.
5. "Short Shots," *FD*, January 16, 1929, 4.
6. "Making Dialogue Sequences," *FD*, January 20, 1929, 2.
7. "Short Shots," *FD*, June 7, 1929, 5; "Columbia Will Make at Least 42 Shorts in East," *FD*, June 9, 1929, 6; "Short Shots," *FD*, July 1, 1929, 7; "Short with Jimmy Rogers [sic] Completed by Columbia," *FD*, December 17, 1929, 2.
8. "Radio-Victor to Make Films at Gramercy Studio," *FD*, November 11, 1929, 1.
9. Donald Crafton, *The Talkies: American Cinema's Transition to Sound, 1926–1931* (New York: Scribner's, 1997), 92.
10. "First Cinephone Film in Work Next Week," *FD*, November 4, 1928, 1; "*Chopin's Passion* First Feature from Cinephone," *FD*, December 24, 1928, 2.
11. "First Cartoon in Sound Playing at Mark Strand," *FD*, August 22, 1928. See also "Another Fable Synchronized," *FD*, November 4, 1928, 12.
12. "First Four Cinephone Cartoons Under Way," *FD*, November 13, 1928, 1.
13. Quoted in Bob Thomas, *Walt Disney: An American Original* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1976), 92.
14. Michael Barrier, *Hollywood Cartoons: American Animation in Its Golden Age* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 52–55.
15. Thomas, *Walt Disney*, 96.
16. Quoted in Thomas, *Walt Disney*, 96.
17. J. B. Kaufman, "The Transcontinental Making of *The Barn Dance*," *Animation Journal* 5, no. 2 (Spring 1997), 36–44.
18. W. E. Garity, with J. N. A. Hawkins, "Fantasound," *JSMPE* 37 (August 1941), 127.
19. "Disney Cartoon Studio," *FDYBK* (1930), 633; Barrier, *Hollywood Cartoons*, 59.
20. *FDYBK* (1930), 633–34; "Cinephone Plans to Produce at New Studio," *FD*, May 14, 1929, 10.
21. "Delf Making Novelties for Powers at New Studio," *FD*, July 7, 1929, 7. *Hot Tips* was said to be the first of these.
22. *FDYBK* (1930), 633–34; "Increase in Activity among Eastern Studios," *FD*, October 26, 1930, 1; "Short Shots," *FD*, November 2, 1930, 1.
23. See the full-page advertisement for Powers Cinephone sound trucks in *FD*, June 6, 1929, 16. Those interested are asked to contact Joseph Seiden, soon to become a major ethnic film producer.
24. "Table of Active Studios," *FD*, July 1, 1928, 45.
25. "*The Shanghai Gesture* to Be First on Vocafilm," *FD*, August 10, 1928, 2; "Maurice Schwartz to Make Yiddish Vocafilm Talkies," *FD*, November 11, 1928, 1. Schwartz was said to have signed a ten-year contract covering twenty films!
26. "Spitz Declares He Has Bought Vocafilm Control," *FD*, March 22, 1929, 2.
27. "26 Song Shorts Being Made by Advance at Chromotone," *FD*, August 4, 1929, 7; *FDYBK* (1929), 378.
28. Peter Morris, *Embattled Shadows: A History of Canadian Cinema, 1895–1939* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1978), 182–85. See also D. J. Turner, ed., *Canadian Feature Film Index* (Ottawa: Public Archives of Canada, 1987), 10–11.
29. "Neal Hart Making Talking Sequences at Chromotone," *FD*, May 26, 1929, 10; "Dialoguing Hart Film," *FD*, August 1, 1929, 2; "Hart Completes Sound Film," *FD*, August 7, 1929, 2.
30. Morris, *Embattled Shadows*, 184–85.
31. Crafton, *The Talkies*, 92–93.
32. "Johnny [sic] Walker Plans to Make Phonofilm Talker," *FD*, December 28, 1928, 1; "Short Shots," *FD*, January 13, 1929, 12, and February 7, 1929, 8. For Anderson, see "Short Shots," *FD*, September 12, 1930, 12.
33. "Short Shots," *FD*, March 24, 1929, 6, and April 7, 1929, 7. Delf's cameramen were Buddy Harris and Danny Cavelli. Edwin M. Bradley, *The First Hollywood Sound Shorts, 1926–1931* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2005), 148, shows *At the Photographer's* as distributed by Ellbee Pictures.
34. "Weiss Brothers Operating De Forest Studio in N.Y.," *FD*, April 10, 1929, 1.
35. "Barker Starts Third," *FD*, September 18, 1929, 2.
36. "Weiss Brothers Plan Talking Feature Monthly in East," *FD*, July 7, 1929, 7; "Second Snub Pollard Talker Set," *FD*, August 27, 1929, 6. Goodwins also directed Pollard in *Pipe Down*.
37. Quoted in Paul A. Scaramazza, ed., *Ten Years in Paradise* (Arlington, VA: Pleasant Press, 1974), 198.
38. "Short Shots," *FD*, February 20, 1929, 4, March 6, 1929, 4, and August 19, 1929, 6.
39. "Short Shots," *FD*, December 29, 1929, 4; "Amer. Sound Studios to Carry Out New Program," *FD*, January 12, 1930, 4. Bradley, *First Hollywood Sound Shorts*, has nothing on these titles.
40. "Fotovox Starts Signing Talent for Talking Films," *FD*, September 19, 1928, 1.
41. *Ghost Town: The Story of Fort Lee* (1935), directed by Theodore Huff and Mark Borgatta. Fort Lee's status as an industrial ruin was certified four years earlier, when the *New York Times Magazine* ran a lengthy piece describing it as "a ghastly cemetery, with monuments of scaling concrete, crumbling brick, warped steel and shattered glass. . . . Now even the ivy on the walls that housed these phenomena is dead." Parke F. Hanley, "Ghosts in the Cradle of the Movies," May 31, 1931, 15.
42. Irving Browning, "A Crumbled Movie Empire," *AC*, August 1945, 262.
43. "Fort Lee Fire Razes Famed Film Studios," *NYT*, March 24, 1952, 1.
44. "Improving N.J. Studio," *FD*, October 21, 1928, 2. The address was 1996 Boulevard East, Hudson Heights, an area now considered part of West New York.
45. "Photocolor Leases Ideal until Own Studio Ready," *FD*, February 2, 1930, 6.
46. "First Color Slapstick," *FD*, February 2, 1930, 6; "Slapstick Principals Chosen," *FD*, February 9, 1930, 6; "Brock Busy Turning Out RKO Subjects," *FD*, March 9, 1930, 6; "Armetta Becomes 'Tony,'" *FD*, May 18, 1930, 5.
47. "Short Shots," *FD*, May 6, 1930, 9. *A Peep on the*

*Deep* may have been the only Clark and McCullough shot at Ideal.

48. Lou Brock and Mark Sandrich were ordered back to Hollywood on June 18. See “Brock Goes West,” *FD*, June 15, 1930, 5.

49. Simon Louvish, *Man on the Flying Trapeze: The Life and Times of W. C. Fields* (London: Faber & Faber, 1997), 312–13.

50. “W. C. Fields Signed by Brock for Radio,” *FD*, April 6, 1930, 38; “Brock Busy on Three RKO Star Comedies,” *FD*, April 20, 1930, 4.

51. “Short Shots,” *FD*, February 25, 1930, 4.

52. “Short Shots,” *FD*, November 10, 1930, 11, and November 19, 1930, 11; “Simple Simon Comedies” advertisement, *FD*, April 12, 1931, 14. *Radio Madness* was retitled, probably as *A Shocking Affair*.

53. “Short Shots,” *FD*, December 6, 1931, 5. See also *AFI Catalog* listing.

54. “New Producing Company to Star Bill Robinson,” *FD*, February 4, 1932, 1.

55. “New Eastern Studio Unit Plans Juvenile Shorts,” *FD*, May 3, 1931, 1; “Andrew J. Briskin Heads New Jersey Studio Unit,” *FD*, June 21, 1931, 1; “Opening of Royal Studio Scheduled for July 30,” *FD*, June 24, 1931, 2; “Short Shots,” *FD*, October 25, 1931, 5; “Photophone Wiring Royal Studio,” *FD*, November 19, 1931, 1.

56. “Harry Langdon Making Two-Reel Series in East,” *FD*, February 3, 1932, 1; “Short Shots,” *FD*, February 24, 1932, 6; “Langdon Finishes First,” *FD*, March 1, 1932, 2. See also “Building Permits,” February 1932, Fort Lee Building Department.

57. “Short Shots,” *FD*, March 20, 1932, 5.

58. “Short Shots,” *FD*, March 24, 1932, 30.

59. “Goldstone Preparing to Start First Sound Film,” *FD*, October 29, 1928, 1.

60. “Studio Blast Toll One Dead and 14 Injured,” *FD*, October 10, 1928, 2; “Largest Sound Stage Is Planned for Tonefilm,” *FD*, October 30, 1928, 8; “One Man Killed and Several Injured in Fort Lee Explosion,” *The Palisadian*, October 12, 1928, 1. The last of these accounts blames the disaster on a carelessly discarded cigarette igniting rubber cement adhesive solution.

61. “First Biophone Feature to Be Made as Operetta,” *FD*, November 12, 1928, 1. Bradley has no information on these titles in *First Hollywood Sound Shorts*.

62. “Short Shots,” *FD*, February 8, 1929, 10, and February 17, 1929, 3.

63. “Short Shots,” *FD*, April 8, 1929, 5, and April 11, 1929, 6; “*The House of Secrets*,” *FD*, May 26, 1929, 8.

64. “Raytone Speeds Work,” *FD*, July 1, 1929, 4, says there will be eighteen one-reelers and twelve two-reelers in this series. “Rayart to Make 24 Sound Shorts, Features in East,” *FD*, September 8, 1929, 6, gives a different figure.

65. “Raytone Feature Talker, Three Shorts Completed” *FD*, September 18, 1929, 8. Again, Bradley, *First Hollywood Sound Shorts*, lists no films with these titles.

66. Potamkin’s “New York Notes” appeared in the December 1929 and February, March, August, and October 1930 issues of *Close Up*. They are collected in *The Compound Cinema: The Film Writings of Harry Alan Potamkin*, ed. Lewis Jacobs (New York: Teachers College Press, 1977), 358–98.

67. “Short Shots,” *FD*, September 27, 1929, 7. The film, produced by Max Cohen and Sidney Goldin, is described under the title *The Wailing Wall*.

68. “Pathé Continues Eastern Production at Ft. Lee,” *FD*, January 8, 1930, 1.

69. “Short Shots,” *FD*, January 26, 1930, 6. If these films were produced, they were released with different titles, possibly *The Palooka Flying School* and *The Strange Interview*.

70. “Series of 40 Operas Being Produced in East,” *FD*, May 11, 1930, 1; “Independent Activity Forces Better Studios,” *FD*, May 11, 1930, 5.

71. *Cinematography*, July 1930, 15, ran a production still showing the camera crew at work on the film.

72. For accounts of the production of *Corianton*, see the following issues of *FD*: “Increase in Activity among Eastern Studios,” October 26, 1930, 1; “Planning *Ben-Hur* Successor,” November 9, 1930, 4; “Film Spectacle Finished,” January 11, 1931, 5; “Short Shots,” January 18, 1931, 5.

73. The only surviving print of *Corianton* was recently discovered by James D’Arc and preserved by Brigham Young University. James D’Arc interviewed by Richard Koszarski, March 5, 2005.

74. “Micheaux Film Corp. to Make Negro Feature,” *FD*, January 6, 1931, 2; “Short Shots,” *FD*, January 28, 1931, 7.

75. “Short Shots,” *FD*, April 24, 1931, 9.

76. “*Alice in Wonderland*,” *NYT*, December 28, 1931, 23. Still, the *Times* did find a degree of charm here, “notwithstanding the drawbacks of poor photography and none too efficient vocal recording.”

77. “Indie Producer Plans Four Kid Films in East,” *FD*, June 12, 1931, 2; “*Alice in Wonderland* on 16mm,” *FD*, August 11, 1931, 2. A subsequent production of *Rip Van Winkle* appears to have been canceled.

78. “Independent Studios Find Demand for Space,” *FD*, January 18, 1931, 5.

79. This production for (and often by) ethnic groups already resident in America is of course distinct from those foreign-language films produced by the major studios for their export market, like *Die Königsloge* (Warners, 1929) or *La grande mare* (Paramount, 1930).

80. Juan Heinink and Robert Dickson, *Cita en Hollywood* (Bilbao: Ediciones Mensajero, 1990), 307–8. Titles included *Sombra vengadora* and *Los bombones del Abor*.

81. “Short Shots,” *FD*, October 19, 1931, 6.

82. Giuliana Bruno, *Streetwalking on a Ruined Map: Cultural Theory and the City Films of Elvira Notari* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 122–23.

83. “Audio-Cinema Starts Work on *I Pagliacci*,” *FD*, March 19, 1930, 9; “Series of 40 Operas Being Produced in East.”

84. “Central Park Theatre to Open February 20th,” *Gotham Life*, February 22, 1931, 39. The theater was previously the Jolson, later the Century.

85. See *AFI Catalog*; the film was also known as *Immacolata* and *Such Is Life*.

86. “Short Shots,” *FD*, December 13, 1931, 5, and February 1, 1932, 1.

87. “Short Shots,” *FD*, November 4, 1931, 4; *AFI Catalog*.

88. Translated dialogue continuity, *Cuore d'emigrante*, file 21374-141, Motion Picture Department



Case Files, New York State Library, Albany. The New York State Censorship Commission required that certified dialogue translations be provided for every foreign-language film exhibited in New York.

89. The *AFI Catalog* says the film was shot at the RCA Sound Studios, but RCA's Gramercy studio had been closed since the Pathé fire in 1929. This may mean that RCA had reactivated its long-dormant facility at 411 Fifth Avenue, or it may just be a misprint for RLA.

90. "A Tragedy in Italian," *NYT*, October 4, 1932, 26.

91. *AFI Catalog*.

92. Joe Seiden, "Sound Possibilities," *Cinematography*, June 1930, 23, 26.

93. *AFI Catalog*.

94. Steve Jones interviewed by Sam Robert, June 24, 1973, collection of the Museum of the Moving Image, Astoria, NY.

95. *AFI Catalog*. The image of New York's skyline as an inadequate substitute for the majestic peaks of the Old Country is hardly unique to this film. See, for example, Luis Trenker's *Der verlorene Sohn*, a German film shot largely in New York in 1934.

96. "Theatres in U.S. That Exhibit Foreign Pictures," *MPA* (1933), 458; Everardo Artico, ed., *Gli anni del cinema italiano: 1930* (Venice: Marsilio, 1990).

97. Translated dialogue continuity, *Bride of the East*, file 21759-92, Motion Picture Department Case Files, New York State Library, Albany. The film was directed by Jack Cameron and appears to have included a color sequence of some kind. See also "Musical Shorts Series in Work at Atlas Studio," *FD*, April 13, 1931, 2, where what is apparently this same film is credited to the Syrian-American Talking Picture Company, Edward Gillett and Edward Dibe, producers.

98. Translated dialogue continuity, *The Belle of Al-Mabrajan*, file 22155-107, Motion Picture Department Case Files, New York State Library, Albany.

99. *AFI Catalog*; "Berk, Benjamin," *MPA* (1933), 49. See also the Atlas Sound Film trade advertisement in this same volume of *MPA* (p. 443), which lists "Yugoslavian Pictures" as one of its clients.

100. H.T.S., "A Croatian Language Film," *NYT*, December 16, 1932, 25; Kauf., "Ljubav i Strast," *Variety*, December 20, 1932.

101. "Zion Films, Inc., Rushing Work on Jewish Picture," *MPW*, March 22, 1919, 1639.

102. Eric Goldman, *Visions, Images, and Dreams: Yiddish Film Past and Present* (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press, 1983), 31–32, cites an eyewitness to the production of *Tsebrokhene Hertser* who remembered it being shot in a studio at 163rd Street and Third Avenue. This was probably the Bronx Tec-Art studio, actually located a few blocks away.

103. Judith Goldberg, *Laughter through Tears: The Yiddish Cinema* (East Brunswick, NJ: Associated University Presses, 1983), 57.

104. "Short Shots," *FD*, March 24, 1929, 6, and April 15, 1929, 6; "Finishing Colored Shorts," *FD*, May 19, 1929, 10.

105. "Writing Molly Picon Shorts," *FD*, May 19, 1929, 10.

106. "Shilling Making Color Talkie," *FD*, August 25, 1930, 2. William Shilling was the producer.

107. "Short Shots," *FD*, January 8, 1931, 15, and February 16, 1931, 6. "Short Shots," *FD*, January 28, 1931, 7, says that Hellenic Pictures is now editing its film for showing in Greek neighborhoods. *Such Is Life* was promoted as the first "all Greek" feature and appears to have been the only such film made in the New York area during this period. It should not be confused with the similarly titled Italian film made later that year at the Metropolitan studio.

108. See the full-page advertisement for Powers Cinephone sound trucks in *FD*, June 6, 1929, 16, where interested parties are asked to contact Seiden at 729 Seventh Avenue. "Increasing Production of Yiddish Pictures," *FD*, March 30, 1931, 2, says that RLA is using Melotone sound equipment, a disc-based process, for location work.

109. Joseph Seiden, "First Generation Talkies," *The Screen Director*, May 13, 1949, 5. See also "Erlander Theaters to Play Jewish Talking Picture Units," *FD*, January 15, 1931, 1; "Increasing Production of Yiddish Pictures."

110. Goldman, *Visions, Images, and Dreams*, 64. Seiden's equipment rental business was similarly upgraded. His display advertisement for Artone Sound Products, Inc. says he is "[e]quipped to put sound track on your Silent Films. Also ready with Portable Cameras to make talkies anywhere. PRICES RIGHT." *MPA* (1931), 357.

111. Seiden, "First Generation Talkies."

112. Goldman, *Visions, Images, and Dreams*, 58.

113. *Ibid.*, 61.

114. "Satz Starts Film Work Today," *FD*, July 2, 1931, 12.

115. *AFI Catalog*; J. Hoberman, *Bridge of Light: Yiddish Film between Two Worlds* (New York: Schocken Books, 1991), 158–61.

116. Hazard Reeves was a pioneer in the development of magnetic recording of motion picture sound tracks, introducing the revolutionary Reeves Magi-corder to New York producers just after the war. He also created the six-track surround system employed by Fred Waller's Cinerama in the 1950s.

117. Goldman, in *Visions, Images, and Dreams*, 112–41, specifically dates this golden age from the production of Edgar G. Ulmer's *Grine Felder* in 1937. Without using this same term, Hoberman clearly agrees (*Bridge of Light*, 235–55).

118. Charlene Regester, "African-American Extras in Hollywood during the 1920s and 1930s," *Film History* 9, no. 1 (1997), 95–115.

119. Dorothy Manners, "Enter the Dixies," *Motion Picture Classic*, February 1929, 63.

120. Robert Benchley writing in *Opportunity* (April 1929), quoted in Donald Bogle's introduction to John Kisch and Edward Mapp, *A Separate Cinema: Fifty Years of Black-Cast Posters* (New York: Noonday Press, 1992), xix–xx.

121. "Short Shots," *FD*, June 7, 1929, 5, and July 1, 1929, 7. Representative titles include *Noble Sissle and Eubie Blake, International Stars of Syncopation, Offer Their Version of "The Big Parade"* (Vitaphone, 1927); *The Utica Jubilee Singers in a Program of Negro Spirituals* (Vitaphone, 1927); *The Kentucky Jubilee Choir Singing "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot" [and] "My Old Kentucky"*

*Home*" (Fox-Case, 1928); *George Dewey Washington [in] Songs: "Chloe" and "Just a Melody Out of the Sky"* (Metro Movietone, 1928); *Miller and Lyles in "Harlem Knights"* (Vitaphone, 1929); *Old Man Trouble* (Columbia, 1929); *St. Louis Blues* (RKO, 1929).

122. "Short Shots," *FD*, August 29, 1929, 10.

123. "Short Shots," *FD*, April 15, 1929, 6; "Finishing Colored Shorts," *FD*, May 19, 1929, 10. What marks the RLA-Goldberg operation as a true race film producer is that all of its films were directed to the African American market.

124. "Paragon Pictures in New Studio," *FD*, January 20, 1931, 2; "Plan 3 Features, 6 Shorts with All Negro Players," *FD*, March 21, 1932, 2. The *AFI Catalog* suggests that Paragon may have completed at least one of these films, *Out of the Crimson Fog* (1932).

125. Theophilus Lewis, "The Harlem Sketch Book," *New York Amsterdam News*, April 16, 1930, 10; "Daughter of the Congo, All-Colored Picture at the Lando Next Week," *Pittsburgh Courier*, August 30, 1930, A7.

126. "Micheaux Film Corp. to Make Negro Features," *FD*, January 6, 1931, 2; "Short Shots," *FD*, January 28, 1931, 7; "Micheaux to Produce New Film," *Chicago Defender*, January 10, 1931, 8. *The Exile* never played Broadway; a year later Schiffman and Micheaux were locked in a court battle over "misappropriation" of the film's \$10,000 budget. "Micheaux Defeated in Ruling," *New York Amsterdam News*, May 18, 1932, 1.

127. "Pathé Continues Eastern Production at Ft. Lee," *FD*, January 6, 1930, 1; "Film Spectacle Finished," *FD*, January 11, 1931, 5.

128. "Walter Strengre Heads Cameraman's Union," *FD*, December 8, 1929, 7.

129. Thomas Cripps, *Slow Fade to Black: The Negro in American Film, 1900–1942* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 323, uses this term to summarize contemporary critical and commercial response to the film.

130. "Six Negro Features Planned by Micheaux," *FD*, January 8, 1932, 2; "Second Negro Feature," *FD*, February 1, 1932, 2.

131. Richard Grunpenhoff, *The Black Valentino: The Stage and Screen Career of Lorenzo Tucker* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow, 1988), 66, quotes Tucker as denying that the phrase "black Valentino" was used during this period, a time when only "colored" was considered appropriate.

132. Tucker quoted in Grunpenhoff, *Black Valentino*, 76.

133. *Ibid.*, 75.

134. *New York Amsterdam News*, May 18, 1932, quoted in Pearl Bowser and Louise Spence, *Writing Himself into History: Oscar Micheaux, His Silent Films, and His Audiences* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2000), 259n.12.

135. Tucker, who rather admired Micheaux's ingenuity regarding this use of low-tech lighting equipment, remembered that the director referred to this technique as "bending light." Grunpenhoff, *Black Valentino*, 76.

136. Jump cuts in surviving prints of other Micheaux talkies often appear to have been the result not of print damage but of his removal of such off-screen prompting in postproduction. Micheaux seems to have continued the silent tradition of talking his actors through a

scene, later snipping out his interpolations in the editing room. The fact that this time Micheaux's voice was left in only emphasizes the haphazard production of this one film.

137. J. Ronald Green, *Straight Lick: The Cinema of Oscar Micheaux* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), 53.

138. J. Hoberman, "Bad Movies," *Film Comment* 16, no. 4 (July–August 1980), 7–12.

139. The film was first announced as *Harlem Holiday*, then *Anybody's Woman*, and later *Nobody's Woman*. Nina Mae McKinney was reported as appearing in the Kenmore Theatre sequences, but she is not credited on the surviving prints. "New Producing Company to Star Bill Robinson," *FD*, February 4, 1932, 1; "Short Shots," *FD*, February 21, 1932, 5, February 28, 1932, 5, and March 6, 1932, 5.

140. See Larry Richards, *African American Films through 1959* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1998), 150, and *AFI Catalog*.

141. Cripps, *Slow Fade to Black*, 325–26.

142. "Audio-Cinema Making Sound Shorts Program," *FD*, January 26, 1930, 6; "Short Shots," *FD*, March 26, 1930, 7. Audio received an industrial film license on October 4, 1929, and a theatrical license on January 7, 1930. U.S. Federal Communications Commission, *Special Investigation—Docket No. 1. Report on Electrical Research Products, Inc. Part II. Trade Practices of the Bell System in Its Relations with the Motion Picture Industry* (January 30, 1937), 424.

143. "Audio-Cinema Starts Work on *I Pagliacci*," *FD*, March 19, 1930, 9; "First Screen Opera Is Completed in East," *FD*, March 30, 1930, 6.

144. "Short Shots," *FD*, September 17, 1929, 11, says these Italian films will be shot at the Famous Sound Studio Corporation facility, formerly the Edison studio. Edwin Earle Smith had just acquired the studio from R. L. Griffin and had announced an ambitious production plan to begin as soon as soundproofing was completed. The studio was said to have two stages: 85 × 120 × 32 and 34 × 42 × 20. "Acquire Edison Studio; Plan 13 Sound Features," *FD*, September 4, 1929, 8.

145. "Two More Screen Operas Under Way in East," *FD*, July 6, 1930, 5.

146. Both the *AFI Catalog* and the May 1930 *AC* say the film was made in Long Island City, although *FD*, March 19, 1930, 9, names the Edison studio.

147. "Labrador Sound Unit Due Back," *FD*, May 11, 1930, 5; "Frissell, Chanler Plan Two More Travel Films," *FD*, May 25, 1930, 1.

148. Kevin Brownlow, *The War, the West, and the Wilderness* (New York: Knopf, 1979), 541–45.

149. Most of the location sound recorded in Africa for *Trader Horn* "was done over again in Culver City," along with much of the dramatic action. Brownlow, *War, West, Wilderness*, 564.

150. A. W. Manchec, "Sound Recording in the Arctic[sic]," *Cinematography*, July 1930, 9, 24.

151. "Short Shots," *FD*, April 21, 1931, 7.

152. "Audio-Cinema Is Active in Eastern Shorts Field," *FD*, April 6, 1930, 22, says the Terrytoons are being made in Long Island City, but one year later "New York Short Subject Personnel," *FD*, April 12, 1931, has

them being made in the Bronx. The first Terrytoon in this series was released on February 23, 1930.

153. "Audio-Cinema Leases Former Edison Studio," *FD*, June 29, 1930, 5.

154. "Short Shots," *FD*, February 3, 1930, 5. "Increase in Activity among Eastern Studios," *FD*, October 26, 1930, 5, refers to Pathé's production at "the old Audio-Cinema studios."

155. "Two Cameramen Hurt," *FD*, July 10, 1930, 2; "Roy D'Arcy Starring in 10 Two-Reel Shorts," *FD*, September 5, 1930, 2.

156. "Audio-Cinema Planning Increased Production," *FD*, November 23, 1930, 5.

157. "Short Shots," *FD*, September 9, 1930, 11, and September 15, 1930, 7; "Sam Orange Launches New Cartoon Series," *FD*, October 13, 1930, 1; "Universal Producing Serial in the East," *FD*, March 8, 1931, 1.

158. "Short Shots," *FD*, April 12, 1931, 28.

159. "Ancient Rivals Combine Forces," *Gotham Life*, March 8, 1931, 37; "New Stage-Talker Combination Called 'Third Dimension' in Sound," *FD*, March 16, 1931, 3. Herbert Biberman (1900–1971) later moved to Hollywood, where he worked as a writer and director of low-budget films. He is best known as one of the Hollywood Ten, political radicals who were jailed for refusing to answer questions before the House Un-American Activities Committee. Blacklisted in Hollywood, he directed the landmark independent feature *Salt of the Earth* (1954).

160. Charles Higham, *The Films of Orson Welles* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1970), 6–8.

161. "Welles Laments Wane of Theatre," *NYT*, June 29, 1938, 12.

162. Quoted in John Dorr, "Griffith's Talkies," *Take One* 3 (November–December 1971), 10.

163. Anita Loos later attempted to distance herself from the disaster by claiming that she had written the film as a comedy, intended for Jimmy Durante. See, for example, Lillian Gish, *The Movies, Mr. Griffith, and Me* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1969), 314–15.

164. Quoted in Arthur Lennig, ed., *The Sound Film: An Introduction* (Troy, NY: Lennig, 1969), 36.

165. "Eastern Studio Activities," *FD*, June 28, 1931, 5; Richard and Diane Koszarski, "'No Problems. They Liked What They Saw on Screen': An Interview with Joseph Ruttenberg," *Film History* 1, no. 1 (1987), 77 (hereafter Koszarski, "Interview with Ruttenberg").

166. Koszarski, "Interview with Ruttenberg," 78.

167. Gish, *The Movies, Mr. Griffith, and Me*, 314.

168. Quoted in Lennig, ed., *Sound Film*, 43.

169. Rogan quoted in Robert Henderson, *D. W. Griffith: His Life and Work* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), 277.

170. The taint of this one scene haunted the film for years. In August 1935 United Artists planned to reissue *The Struggle* and applied to the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors Association for a Production Code Seal. Code administrator Joe Breen replied on August 31 that it would first be necessary to "eliminate the scenes of the drunken father abusing and beating the child." Three days later UA withdrew the application. Information listed as an addendum to reissue application for *The Emperor Jones*, Production Code Administration Files, Margaret Herrick Library,

Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Beverly Hills, CA.

171. Advertisement for *The Struggle*, *FD*, December 4, 1931, 5.

172. Iris Barry, *D. W. Griffith: American Film Master* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1940), 33.

173. Ezra Goodman, *The Fifty-Year Decline and Fall of Hollywood* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1961), 1–2.

174. Andrew Sarris, "New York," *Movie* 14 (1965), 43–44.

175. Leonard Maltin, *Of Mice and Magic: A History of American Animated Cartoons* (New York: NAL, 1980), 129.

## Chapter 8: Independent Alternatives

1. John Brooks, *Telephone: The First Hundred Years* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), 180–82.

2. U.S. Federal Communications Commission, *Investigation of the Telephone Industry in the United States*, 76th Cong., 1st sess., House Document no. 340 (1939), 410–11 (hereafter FCC, *Investigation of the Telephone Industry*). Janet Wasko provides a useful summary of ERPI's studio operations in *Movies and Money: Financing the American Film Industry* (Norwood, NJ: ABLEX, 1982), 60–69.

3. U.S. Federal Communications Commission, *Special Investigation—Docket No. 1. Report on Electrical Research Products, Inc. Part II. Trade Practices of the Bell System in Its Relations with the Motion Picture Industry* (January 30, 1937), 423–27 (hereafter FCC, *Trade Practices of the Bell System*).

4. "Short Shots," *FD*, February 7, 1932, 5.

5. FCC, *Investigation of the Telephone Industry*, 410–11.

6. Eastern Service Studios, Inc. advertisement, *MPA* (1932), 225.

7. According to "First Memory Lane Done," *FD*, March 18, 1932, 2, William Rowland had shot the first of these, with Louis Sobol and Texas Guinan, many months earlier at the Standard Sound Recording Studios.

8. "Another Universal Scoop," *Universal Weekly*, November 12, 1932, 7; "At Last—Walter Winchell in a Motion Picture," *Universal Weekly*, January 28, 1933, 10; "Radio Murder Mystery," *Universal Weekly*, March 4, 1933, 31.

9. There is some question as to which ESSI studio was used for this film. "Flashes from Studios," *NYT*, November 12, 1933, X 4, identifies it as having been made at the Edison studio. But director Chester Erskin, in a later interview, claimed the film was shot in Astoria. Marguerite Tazelaar, "Revival of Biograph Studios Marks Trend from Hollywood," *NYHT*, March 11, 1934. It is possible that both studios were used in some fashion.

10. Erskin had directed the curious Rodgers and Hart musical *Hallelujah, I'm a Bum* in Hollywood the previous summer. But producer Joseph Schenck ordered the film completely remade by Lewis Milestone after viewing Erskin's cut. *AFI Catalog*.

11. William Boehnel, "Odd Tricks of Filming in Midnight," *New York World-Telegram*, March 12, 1934. Boehnel also wrote, "When a director makes such a pompous use of his camera that it draws away from the

dramatic value of his narrative the effect is usually more annoying than interesting,” a comment that makes one especially sorry for the loss of Erskin’s version of *Hal-lelujab, I’m a Bum*.

12. A. M. Sperber and Eric Lax, *Bogart* (New York: William Morrow, 1997), 43–44. By an odd coincidence, this address is very close to the fictional location of Sidney Kingsley’s *Dead End*, which would become one of Bogart’s first Hollywood hits. Sperber and Lax are wrong when they say *Midnight* was produced in “early 1934”; they probably did not realize just how long this minor film sat on the shelf before being released.

13. FCC, *Trade Practices of the Bell System*, 429.

14. George Folsey interviewed by Irene Atkins, April 24, 1979, collection of the Museum of the Moving Image, Astoria, NY.

15. “Picture Plays and Players,” *New York Sun*, April 1, 1933.

16. “Louis Sobol Featured in *Peeping Tom* [sic],” *Universal Weekly*, August 26, 1933, 5. Joseph Santley was the director.

17. Donald Bogle, in *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mam-mies, & Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Film* (New York: Viking, 1973), 98, believes it to be Robeson’s finest role. Thomas Cripps, *Slow Fade to Black: The Negro in American Film, 1900–1942* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 208, identifies the Astoria studio as crucial to the project, although he is wrong in crediting Paramount for making the facility available.

18. Scott MacQueen, “Rise and Fall of *The Emperor Jones*,” *AC* 71, no. 2 (February 1990), 36.

19. In January 1934 Krimsky would return to ESSi to produce a dubbed version of this film, titled *Girls in Uniform*. Eleanor Phelps and Adele Ronson voiced the roles of Fräulein von Bernburg and Manuela von Meinhardis. “*Girls in Uniform* Opens,” *NYT*, January 25, 1934, 15.

20. Quoted in MacQueen, “Rise and Fall of *The Emperor Jones*,” 35. O’Neill was not so much praising Robeson as expressing his ill regard for Gilpin, who had battled with him repeatedly over script changes.

21. Contract quoted in MacQueen, “Rise and Fall of *The Emperor Jones*,” 36.

22. FCC, *Trade Practices of the Bell System*, 466.

23. William MacAdams, *Ben Hecht: The Man Behind the Legend* (New York: Scribner’s, 1990), 176.

24. Eileen Creelman, “Picture Plays and Players,” *New York Sun*, July 5, 1933.

25. “The Man Who Will Make *Emperor Jones* for the Screen,” *NYHT*, April 2, 1933.

26. See the excellent discussion in Susan Delson, *Dudley Murphy, Hollywood Wild Card* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006).

27. Martin Duberman, *Paul Robeson* (New York: Knopf, 1988), 168.

28. Murphy quoted in Creelman, “Picture Plays and Players.”

29. De Mille received \$6,000 for his work on *The Emperor Jones*, nearly the same as director Dudley Murphy’s \$7,500. MacQueen, “Rise and Fall of *The Emperor Jones*,” 38. In a letter to his daughter Agnes dated August 13, 1933, de Mille wrote that the producers had come close to firing Murphy over his handling

of Robeson’s performance and relented only when he, de Mille, agreed to take over this aspect of the picture himself, a claim that is otherwise unconfirmed. See Delson, *Dudley Murphy*, 137–39.

30. “Filming *Emperor Jones*,” *NYT*, May 26, 1933, 42.

31. Creelman, “Picture Plays and Players.”

32. *New York Sun*, September 20, 1933, untitled clipping in *Emperor Jones* file, Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts (hereafter Billy Rose Collection, NYPL).

33. Regina Crewe, “[*The Emperor Jones*],” *New York American*, September 20, 1933.

34. George Ross, *New York World-Telegram*, June 19, 1933, untitled clipping in *Emperor Jones* file, Billy Rose Collection, NYPL.

35. For example, Richard Corliss, citing *The Emperor Jones* as just another race movie in the tradition of Oscar Micheaux, claims it was “made in a week in 1933 for \$10,000.” “Black Cinema: Micheaux Must Go On,” *Time*, May 13, 2002.

36. Quoted in MacQueen, “Rise and Fall of *The Emperor Jones*,” 40.

37. MacQueen, “Rise and Fall of *The Emperor Jones*,” 39, notes Washington’s displeasure at having to be “dipped.”

38. The 2002 restoration is the most recent of several undertaken on this important film since the American Film Institute made a first try in 1971. See Jennie Saxena, with Ken Weissman and James Cozart, “Preserving African American Cinema: The Case of *The Emperor Jones*,” *The Moving Image* 3, no. 1 (Spring 2003), 42–58. Unfortunately, this latest attempt still lacks a vision sequence in which Jones sees himself being brought to America in a slave ship and sold on an auction block, at which point he uses two bullets from his revolver to kill the auctioneer and plantation owner. His actual attack on a prison guard during the chain gang sequence is also still missing. This degree of black-on-white violence was impermissible even before uniform implementation of the industry’s production code. Not surprisingly, the lack of these scenes has the effect of eliminating any white responsibility for the bad behavior of Jones and those around him.

39. On October 6, 1933, only weeks after the premiere, Krimsky and Cochrane responded to criticism in the African American press by announcing “we are eliminating the word ‘nigger’ from all new prints that [we] will make on *Emperor Jones*.” “Take Insult Out of Movies,” *Chicago Defender*, October 7, 1933, 1. Regardless, the film continued to circulate in cut and uncut versions throughout its initial release. One exhibitor test-marketed both to an audience of “selected guests” before settling on the cut version. William G. Nunn, “Private Preview at the Roosevelt Is Well Received,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, October 21, 1933, A6.

40. Quoted in Thomas Doherty, *Pre-Code Hollywood* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 288. Doherty suggests that the character of Jones in this film is more usefully compared with Tony Camonte in *Scarface* (1932) than with anyone in race movies.

41. Garvey and Robeson quoted in MacQueen, “Rise and Fall of *The Emperor Jones*,” 39–40.

42. MacQueen, “Rise and Fall of *The Emperor Jones*,” 38, cites this information from a July 17, 1934, United



Artists interoffice memo. But in a subsequent letter to *American Cinematographer*, MacQueen notes that the Deluxe lab seized the negative for nonpayment of storage charges at about this same time. Remember that Exhibitors Reliance Corporation was being paid out of first money, not leaving much left over for Krimsky and Cochrane.

43. Wasko, *Movies and Money*, 64.

44. *MPA* (1933), 422.

45. FCC, *Trade Practices of the Bell System*, 449–50.

46. “The Director,” *Moonlight and Pretzels* campaign book, 3. Author’s collection.

47. “Creating Crack Costumes for *Moonlight and Pretzels*,” *Universal Weekly*, August 5, 1933, 24, is a full-page tribute to Brymer.

48. “Behind the Scenes of *Moonlight and Pretzels*,” *Universal Weekly*, July 8, 1933, 12. Ironically, Universal’s publicity never mentioned Hupfeld’s lesser-known “As Time Goes By,” which would not become a standard until it was used in another movie, *Casablanca*, some years later.

49. “Bobby Connolly,” *Universal Weekly*, July 8, 1933, 11.

50. “Projection Jottings,” *NYT*, July 2, 1933, X 3; “Fifty Beauties in *Shoot the Works*,” *Universal Weekly*, May 27, 1933, 12. *Shoot the Works* was the working title of *Moonlight and Pretzels*.

51. “The Week’s Openings,” *NYT*, February 12, 1933, 138.

52. “Country-wide Extent of *Moonlight and Pretzel* Broadcasts,” *Universal Weekly*, August 5, 1933, 14.

53. “Behind the Scenes of *Moonlight and Pretzels*.”

54. “*Moonlight and Pretzels* a Triumph for Formula,” *Hollywood Reporter*, quoted in *Universal Weekly*, July 29, 1933, 22. Richard Barrios, in *A Song in the Dark* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 394, goes so far as to say that the choreography of “Dusty Shoes” was “quite deliberately stolen from *Gold Diggers of 1933*.”

55. Information from “World Revenue Reports—Grand Totals, 1932–33 Features,” Universal Studios, Archives and Collections, Universal City, CA.

56. Quoted in William K. Everson, “Notes for Film Series 42, Program #5,” New School for Social Research Film Series, March 12, 1982, Museum of Modern Art Film Study Center, NY.

57. Mildred Martin, “Musical Picture Seen at Stanley,” *Philadelphia Enquirer*, August 11, 1933.

58. As Richard Barrios points out (*A Song in the Dark*, 400), at a time when original screen musicals were all the rage, *Take a Chance* would be the only movie musical of the year taken directly from the Broadway stage.

59. *Universal Weekly*, August 26, 1933, 7.

60. *Take a Chance* press book, Billy Rose Collection, NYPL. Another example of Connolly copying Berkeley? *Footlight Parade*, which includes a similar homage to Roosevelt’s National Recovery Administration (NRA), opened a month before *Take a Chance*, but long after that film had finished shooting. Taking no chances, Paramount cut most of the number from the film just before release. The footage was subsequently reshaped as a short musical, *New Deal Rhythm* (1934).

61. Vincent Hart to H. Innes, Paramount Pictures Dist. Corp., July 31, 1935, Production Code Adminis-

tration Files, Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Beverly Hills, CA (hereafter PCA Files). The song, by Lou Alter and Arthur Swanstrom, is better known as “Come Up and See Me Sometime.”

62. This assessment leaves out a number of ethnic productions, of course, and a few wartime oddities like *Follies Girl* (1943); but no major Hollywood studio would handle another New York musical until Universal produced *The Wiz* there in 1977—ironically, on the same stages used by *Sweet Surrender*.

63. “*Sweet Surrender*,” *Universal Weekly*, September 28, 1935, 5.

64. *Sweet Surrender* press book, Billy Rose Collection, NYPL.

65. “*Sweet Surrender*,” *Variety*, December 18, 1935.

66. “Preparing to Shoot the Ballet Scenes of *Sweet Surrender*,” *Universal Weekly*, November 2, 1935, 20.

67. *Sweet Surrender* press book.

68. Vincent Hart to Sidney Singerman, Universal Pictures, July 25, 1935, *Sweet Surrender*, PCA Files. The fact that the PCA prohibited the Huey Long number was a blessing in disguise. Long was assassinated on September 8, so any such number would certainly have wound up on the cutting room floor.

69. Hart to Singerman, September 18, 1935, *Sweet Surrender*, PCA Files.

70. “World Revenue Reports—Grand Totals, 1935–36 Features,” Universal Studio Archives and Collections, Universal City, CA. The exact budget figure is unavailable, but Exhibitors Reliance Corporation, which generally provided 60 percent of the total, had \$101,000 invested in the picture. FCC, *Trade Practices of the Bell System*, 466.

71. “A New Producing Unit,” *NYT*, August 27, 1933, X 2.

72. Although Hopkins received screen credit for directing, a *Times* reporter visiting the set noted that it was de Mille who called for six takes of one key scene. *Ibid*.

73. “*His Double Life*,” *Variety*, December 19, 1933.

74. FCC, *Trade Practices of the Bell System*, 450–52.

75. FCC, *Investigation of the Telephone Industry*, 412.

76. Moore quoted in Jack Spears, *Hollywood: The Golden Era* (New York: Castle, 1971), 308–9.

77. “*Social Register*,” *Variety*, October 9, 1934.

78. The eight-picture deal was announced in *New York Daily Mirror*, November 20, 1933, untitled clipping, *Social Register* file, Billy Rose Collection, NYPL.

79. “Screen Notes,” *NYT*, August 1, 1934, 14, and August 13, 1935, 20.

80. “Ocean Travelers,” *NYT*, December 28, 1933, 23.

81. “Screen Notes,” *NYT*, August 9, 1934, 14; “Melodrama in Spanish,” *NYT*, August 14, 1934, 13.

82. Midway through production of these films Gardel made a guest appearance in Paramount’s *The Big Broadcast of 1936*. Tom Reed directed the scenes with Gardel, Jessica Dragonette, and Ethel Merman, which were shot in Astoria in January 1935. “Screen Notes,” *NYT*, January 31, 1935, 23. According to the *AFI Catalog*, Ray Noble, Amos ‘n’ Andy, and other performers filmed additional sequences for the film in Astoria later that summer.

83. As of December 31, 1935, only \$44,538 was out-

standing on this loan. FCC, *Trade Practices of the Bell System*, 466.

84. At least in New York, Paramount switched the release dates of the last two films. *Tango Bar*, generally considered a weaker effort, opened there less than two weeks after Gardel's death. The stronger *El día me quieras* opened seven weeks later, allowing the series to conclude with what many considered his best film.

85. "Mr. Cohan's New Film," *NYT*, September 2, 1934, X 3.

86. See the entry for *Gambling* in *AFI Catalog*.

87. Regina Crewe, "Cohan Screened in Film Version of His Own Play," *New York American*, December 5, 1934.

88. "Artful Camera Illusions," *NYT*, November 26, 1933, X 5.

89. Andre Sennwald, "Cinema Close-Ups," *NYT*, December 9, 1934, X 5.

90. Alfred Hayes, "The Pair from Paramount," *New Theatre*, March 1936, 15.

91. Ben Hecht, *Charlie: The Improbable Life and Times of Charles MacArthur* (New York: Harper & Bros., 1957), 185–87.

92. *Ibid.*, 183.

93. MacAdams, *Hecht*, 169.

94. "Para. Schedules 9 at Astoria Studio," *Hollywood Reporter*, April 25, 1934; "Erpi Backing Hecht-Mac Effort," *Variety*, April 30, 1934; "Paramount to Produce Here," *NYT*, May 4, 1934, 25.

95. Hecht, *Charlie*, 185.

96. MacAdams, *Hecht*, 169–70.

97. Lee Garmes interviewed by Richard and Diane Koszarski, August 10, 1976.

98. Slavko Vorkapich, *On True Cinema* (Beograd: Fakultet Dramskih Umetnosti, 1998), contains a brief biography, filmography, and selection of Vorkapich's writings.

99. "Erpi Backing Hecht-Mac Effort."

100. The sequence used in the final film was cut down at the order of the Production Code Administration, which objected to the "illicit sex relationships" it featured. See *AFI Catalog*. A complete version, as preserved by Vorkapich in his own collection, can be found in the DVD set *Unseen Cinema: Early American Avant-Garde Film 1894–1941* (Image Entertainment, 2005).

101. Hecht, *Charlie*, 188.

102. See MacAdams, *Hecht*, 171.

103. Andre Sennwald, "Scenes in the Making," *NYT*, June 10, 1934, X 4.

104. Charles Higham, *Hollywood Cameramen* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1970), 44–45.

105. *Crime without Passion* press book, Billy Rose Collection, NYPL.

106. Richard Watts Jr. "Crime without Passion," *NYHT*, September 9, 1934.

107. "Crime without Passion," *Variety*, September 4, 1934.

108. "A Red Menace Invades the Ramapos," *NYT*, September 23, 1934, X 5.

109. *Once in a Blue Moon* press book, Billy Rose Collection, NYPL.

110. *Ibid.*

111. Antheil is not even mentioned in Kurt London's *Film Music* (London: Faber & Faber, 1936), which

spends considerable time on the motion picture work of other prominent modern composers. For an account of Antheil's chaotic attempt to record the score while the film was still being cut, see Frank Nugent, "Sound and Fury in Remote Astoria," *NYT*, December 30, 1934, X 5.

112. Hecht, *Charlie*, 189.

113. MacAdams, *Hecht*, 174.

114. *Ibid.*, 170. Hecht, *Charlie*, 191, remembers him as the famous Bippo.

115. George Antheil, *Bad Boy of Music* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1945), 271.

116. Marya Mannes, "Vogue's Spotlight," *Vogue*, November 15, 1934, 60–61.

117. Frank Nugent, "It Happens . . . Once in a Blue Moon," *NYT*, February 16, 1936, IX 5.

118. "Of Local Origin," *NYT*, December 1, 1936, 30; B.R.C., "Once in a Blue Moon," *NYT*, December 2, 1936, 35.

119. Geoff Brown, "Better than Metro Isn't Good Enough!" *Sight and Sound* 44, no. 3 (Summer 1975), 153.

120. "The Scoundrel," *New York Evening Post*, May 3, 1935; MacAdams, *Hecht*, 176.

121. Hecht, *Charlie*, 189.

122. Frank Nugent, "Rattling the Cup in Mad Astoria," *NYT*, February 10, 1935, X 5.

123. Charles Turner interviewed by Richard Koszarski, September 4, 1980, collection of the Museum of the Moving Image, Astoria, NY.

124. Hecht, *Charlie*, 187.

125. Ben Hecht, *A Child of the Century* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1954), 483–84.

126. "The Scoundrel," *Time*, May 13, 1935.

127. Andre Sennwald, "Upon Being Merely Clever," *NYT*, May 5, 1935, X 3.

128. MacAdams, *Hecht*, 177.

129. Hayes, "The Pair from Paramount."

130. "The Myrna Loy Crisis," *NYT*, August 25, 1935, X 2.

131. MacAdams, *Hecht*, 178.

132. Barbara Stanwyck had been shooting a similar project, *Red Salute*, while Hecht and MacArthur were in Hollywood that summer. Other films dealing directly with the challenge of radical politics, like Frank Capra's *Moscow*, never made it past the planning stage.

133. Shamroy had an interesting background in documentary and experimental films. He had worked with Robert Flaherty and in 1928 had shot the first American avant-garde feature, *The Last Moment*, for Paul Fejos. He later became a Technicolor specialist, winning Academy Awards for films like *Leave Her to Heaven* (1945) and *Cleopatra* (1963).

134. Frank Nugent, "Thunder over Astoria," *NYT*, October 27, 1935, IX 5.

135. *Soak the Rich*, press book, Billy Rose Collection, NYPL.

136. Nugent, "Thunder over Astoria."

137. MacAdams, *Hecht*, 178–79.

138. Quoted in Higham, *Hollywood Cameramen*, 24–25. On the other hand, Garmes may have agreed to this "less pay, more credit" gambit. As he told Higham in the same set of interviews, "Financially the association with them hurt me; professionally it helped me" (44).



139. "Soak the Rich," *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, February 7, 1936.

140. "Soak the Rich," *New York Sun*, February 7, 1936.

141. "Hits and Flops of '36," *Hollywood Reporter*, July 13, 1936, 1.

142. An internal ERPI document dated December 31, 1935, shows that Exhibitors Reliance Corporation had invested \$680,004 in the Hecht-MacArthur productions. At that date there was still an outstanding balance of \$157,995, which would have to come from *Once in a Blue Moon* and *Soak the Rich*, still unreleased. Even if these two films managed to eke out this sum, it is unlikely there would be much left over for the other profit participants. FCC, *Trade Practices of the Bell System*, 466.

143. "History of Republic Pictures," *MPA* (1945–1946), 457.

144. Richard and Diane Koszarski, "'No Problems. They Liked What they Saw on the Screen': An Interview with Joseph Ruttenberg," *Film History* 1, no. 1 (1987), 77.

145. Yates appointed himself treasurer of Biograph Studios, Inc.; Harold Godsoe was production manager, and William Sauter was the house art director. *Film Daily Production Guide and Director's Annual* (1935), 433.

146. Quoted in Tazelaar, "Revival of Biograph Studios."

147. In 1931 Dudley Murphy had directed an excellent two-reel version of *Frankie and Johnnie*, called *He Was Her Man*, for Paramount. The film starred Gilda Gray, was shot at the Astoria studio, and was clearly intended as part of a trilogy on American popular music, a companion piece to Murphy's earlier *St. Louis Blues* and *Black and Tan Fantasy*. See also John Huston, *Frankie and Johnny* (New York: Boni, 1930), the script of an adaptation by Huston, which includes considerable material regarding the many earlier versions of this blues narrative.

148. *Frankie and Johnnie*, PCA Files.

149. *Hollywood Reporter*, March 9, 1935, 2. Helen Morgan and Chester Morris were then on the West Coast. Thanks to Christopher Connelly for this information.

150. "Frankie and Johnnie at Globe," *NYT*, May 25, 1936, 23.

151. Florence Reed had created the role of Mother Goddam in the 1926 production of *The Shanghai Gesture*.

152. "A Wasted Opportunity," *New York World Telegram*, May 26, 1936. At the box office, *Frankie and Johnnie* barely outperformed *Once in a Blue Moon*. The same *Hollywood Reporter* ranking that listed the Hecht and MacArthur film in last place (out of the 221 films released in the first half of 1936) put *Frankie and Johnnie* at number 211. "Hits and Flops of '36."

153. Fay Wray, *On the Other Hand* (New York: St. Martin's, 1989), 158.

154. "In the Mixer's Booth," *NYT*, July 8, 1934, IX 2.

155. An untitled *New York Herald Tribune* clipping, dated September 18, 1934, announces Stroheim's arrival in New York to work on the film. Erich von Stroheim file, Billy Rose Collection, NYPL.

156. Gene Fernet, *Hollywood's Poverty Row* (Satellite Beach, FL: Coral Reef Publications, 1973), 75–78.

157. "Of Local Origin," *NYT*, September 26, 1939, 29. By that time, the studio was owned by the Empire Trust Company.

158. The Atlas Soundfilm Recording Studios were run by J. Burgi Contner, a local cinematographer also involved in promotion of the Cineglow Sound System. *MPA* (1933), 102, 443, 459. The *AFI Catalog* entries for these films suggest they may have been shot directly from the stage.

159. *Beer Is Here!* can be seen at the UCLA Film and Television Archive. *Nearly Naked* exists only as a paper trail in the Motion Picture Commission Archives, box 227, file 25578, New York State Library, Albany.

160. *AFI Catalog*; George Turner and Michael H. Price, *Forgotten Horrors* (Baltimore: Midnight Marquee Press, 1999), 93–95.

161. After Pollard left Atlas to work in his own studio, the Jewish Art Film Company produced *The Wandering Jew* there in July and August 1933. An ambitious historical pageant of Jewish persecution through the Nazi era, it was not well remembered by its star, Jacob Ben-Ami, who later denied having appeared in it. "En Route to the Screen," *NYT*, July 30, 1933, 115; J. Hoberman, *Bridge of Light: Yiddish Film between Two Worlds* (New York: Schocken Books, 1991), 195–97.

162. Henry Lynn was co-director. Although the *AFI Catalog* claims that the film was made at Pollard's new studio in Grantwood, New Jersey (the old Royal studio where *Ljubav i strast* had been shot at the end of 1932), the existing print says it was "supervised by Henry Lynn at Standard Sound Recording Studios, N.Y." Given the quantity and quality of postproduction work on this film, anything is possible.

163. *MPA* (1933), 462; *MPA* (1945–1946), 428.

164. "Ulmer Joins Peerless in Charge of Production," *FD*, February 16, 1932, 2.

165. "Peerless Signs Tom Moore," *FD*, March 7, 1932, 2. See also the entry for *Mr. Broadway* in *AFI Catalog*.

166. "Short Shots," *FD*, March 20, 1932, 5.

167. "Edgar G. Ulmer: An Interview," *Film Culture* 58–59–60 (1974), 200.

168. "Short Shots," *FD*, March 24, 1932, 30, and April 24, 1932, 5.

169. Thanks to Geoff Brown for this information on Serrao/Varney/Lee. E-mail to author, March 20, 2006.

## Chapter 9: Cartoons in the City

1. William de Mille, "Mickey vs Popeye," *The Forum* (November 1935), reprinted in Richard Koszarski, ed., *Hollywood Directors: 1914–1940* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), 295–98.

2. Michael Barrier, *Hollywood Cartoons: American Animation in Its Golden Age* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 64.

3. See, for example, C. Francis Jenkins, *Animated Pictures: An Exposition of the Historical Development of Chronophotography . . .* (Washington, DC: Press of H. L. McQueen, 1898).

4. See Donald Crafton, *Before Mickey: The Animated Film, 1898–1928* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1982), for a survey of many of these early efforts.

5. John Canemaker, *Winsor McCay, His Life and Art* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1987).
6. Donald Crafton, *Emile Cohl, Caricature, and Film* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 157–68.
7. Citations follow Denis Gifford, *American Animated Films: The Silent Era, 1897–1929* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1990). Of the 140 series described in this book, all but a handful were made in the East.
8. Crafton, *Emile Cohl*, 163.
9. “Bray-Hurd: The Key Animation Patents,” *Film History* 2, no. 3 (September–October 1988), 229–66.
10. Bray’s educational films, originally distributed through Paramount Pictographs but later available nontheatrically, included such live-action subjects as the Montessori teaching method and Professor Hugo Munsterberg’s series on “The Mental Faculties.” Arthur Edwin Krows, “Motion Pictures—Not for Theaters,” no. 12, *The Educational Screen* (October 1939), 284–88.
11. Joe Adamson, *The Walter Lantz Story* (New York: Putnam’s, 1985), 46–57.
12. For a good summary of Bray’s accomplishments, along with an interview, see Mark Langer, “The Reflections of John Randolph Bray,” *Griffithiana* 53 (May 1995), 95–131.
13. John Canemaker, *Felix: The Twisted Tale of the World’s Most Famous Cat* (New York: Pantheon, 1991), 33.
14. Crafton, *Before Mickey*, 194–95.
15. Richard Huemer interviewed by Joe Adamson, “From This You Are Making a Living?” *AFI Report* 5, no. 2 (Summer 1974), 17. In 1926–1927 Barré briefly returned to animation at Pat Sullivan’s “Felix the Cat” studio.
16. Leonard Maltin, *Of Mice and Magic: A History of American Animated Cartoons* (New York: NAL, 1980), 13–14.
17. Dick Huemer described for Joe Adamson Barré’s 75 × 100-foot loft studio in the Bronx in “From This You Are Making a Living?” 15.
18. Lantz quoted in Joe Adamson, “Animation Studio Auteur: Gregory La Cava and William Randolph Hearst,” *Griffithiana* 55–56 (September 1996), 87.
19. An attempt to clarify this history is Adamson’s “Animation Studio Auteur,” esp. 93–97.
20. Huemer, “From This You Are Making a Living?” 13.
21. Maltin, *Of Mice and Magic*, 205–6.
22. Canemaker, *Felix*, is the definitive work on this character.
23. *Ibid.*, 123–24.
24. Messmer quoted in Canemaker, *Felix*, 124.
25. Barrier, *Hollywood Cartoons*, 35.
26. Gund marketed its Felix dolls as adult toys (bou-drip dolls), at one point even promoting them with a strip cartoon showing Felix getting drunk on bootleg hooch. See Canemaker, *Felix*, 71.
27. Terry quoted in Maltin, *Of Mice and Magic*, 124.
28. Quoted in Maltin, *Of Mice and Magic*, 121 (Moser), 129 (Tytla).
29. Barrier, *Hollywood Cartoons*, 35.
30. Edwin M. Bradley, *The First Hollywood Sound Shorts, 1926–1931* (Jefferson, NC: MacFarland, 2005), 465.
31. Zander quoted in Maltin, *Of Mice and Magic*, 130.
32. Donald George Figlozzi interviewed by Harvey Deneroff, June 10, 1979, collection of the Museum of the Moving Image, Astoria, NY.
33. Theodore Strauss, “Mr. Terry and the Animal Kingdom,” *NYT*, July 7, 1940, IX 3.
34. Maltin, *Of Mice and Magic*, 127.
35. Lokey quoted in Harvey Deneroff, “Popeye the Union Man: A Historical Study of the Fleischer Strike” (Ph.D. diss., University of Southern California, 1985), 87.
36. For a description of activity at the studio in this period, see “The Making of a Sound Fable,” *Popular Mechanics*, September 1930, 353–55.
37. Maltin, *Of Mice and Magic*, 125.
38. For subsequent release to the nontheatrical market, the “Tom and Jerry” films were renamed “Dick and Larry” cartoons to avoid confusion with MGM’s cat-and-mouse series.
39. “‘Mickey Mouse’ Sues to ‘Save Reputation,’” *NYT*, April 1, 1931, 31; “Blocks Cartoon Like ‘Mickey Mouse,’” *NYT*, April 30, 1931, 15. Thanks to J. B. Kaufman for these citations.
40. Roger Garcia and Bernard Eisenschitz, eds., *Frank Tashlin* (Locarno: British Film Institute, 1994), 198.
41. Klein quoted in Maltin, *Of Mice and Magic*, 201.
42. Gillett quoted in Deneroff, *Popeye the Union Man*, 93.
43. I. Klein, “Cartooning down Broadway,” *Film Comment* 11, no. 1 (January–February 1975), 63.
44. Mark Langer, “Regionalism in Disney Animation: Pink Elephants and *Dumbo*,” *Film History* 4, no. 4 (1990), 305–21. Langer’s main argument here, that the relatively casual production of *Dumbo* allowed the distinctive work of East and West Coast animators to be unusually apparent, demonstrates that such influences moved in both directions.
45. Maltin, *Of Mice and Magic*, 79–80.
46. Leslie Cabarga, *The Fleischer Story* (New York: Nostalgia Press, 1976), 13.
47. Cabarga, *Fleischer Story*, 11, 18, 20, says that the studio’s first home after leaving Bray was “a dingy basement apartment on East 45th Street” before it moved nearby to the 129 East 45th Street location, which it occupied until 1923.
48. “In Eastern Studios,” *FD*, April 25 and June 13, 1926. The series was shot at the Claremont studio on 171st Street in the Bronx.
49. Barrier, *Hollywood Cartoons*, 25–26.
50. Animation historians have given much less coverage to the Rotograph than the Rotoscope; see an illustration of this technique in “With the Unpaid Stars of the Movies,” *Popular Mechanics*, July 1931, 12.
51. Richard Fleischer, *Out of the Inkwell: Max Fleischer and the Animation Revolution* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2005), 47–48.
52. In 1930, seventeen of the twenty-nine Fleischer releases were Screen Songs.
53. Fleischer, *Out of the Inkwell*, 73.
54. “Complicated Work of Making Film Cartoons,” *NYT*, December 28, 1930, X 6. It is unclear why the *Times* held back this account for six months; perhaps the growing popularity of the series suddenly encouraged someone to pull it from the files. The “news lab”

at 544 West 43rd Street was also the home of the Paramount sound newsreel.

55. John Canemaker, "Grim Natwick," *Film Comment* 11, no. 1 (January–February 1975), 58.

56. "Miss Kane Loses Suit over 'Boop' Singing," *NYT*, May 6, 1934, N 5. A film was presented in evidence, demonstrating that Baby Esther, an African-American cabaret singer, had been using this style since 1928. See "The 'Boop' Song Is Traced," *NYT*, May 2, 1934, 24.

57. Richard Fleischer remembered Lillian Friedman as "the first woman animator," but her presence at the studio would seem the only exception to this rule. *Out of the Inkwell*, 87.

58. Leslie Cabarga, *Fleischer Story*, 50, suggests that Fleischer used Cab Calloway and his orchestra not because they were already making live-action shorts for Paramount but because they were touring Paramount's theater chain. The films, shown in advance of the orchestra's appearance, were seen as good promotional material. The same might also be true of other musical acts Fleischer employed.

59. Norman Klein, *Seven Minutes: The Life and Death of the American Animated Cartoon* (New York: Verso, 1993), 63.

60. Barrier, *Hollywood Cartoons*, 182.

61. Gregory Waller, "Hollywood Censored," *Film History* 3, no. 3 (1989), 180.

62. For an account of developments in screen censorship during 1930–1934, see Thomas Doherty, *Pre-Code Hollywood: Sex, Immorality, and Insurrection in American Cinema, 1930–1934* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999). Like most historians, Doherty hardly mentions the effects on animation.

63. The Betty Boop series continued until 1939, although the energy had long since run out of the character.

64. Given that Fleischer had already been sued by Helen Kane for basing the Betty Boop character on her persona, it seems unusually careless of him to have done the same thing to Zasu Pitts.

65. De Mille, "Mickey vs Popeye," 298.

66. Maltin, *Of Mice and Magic*, 106; Cabarga, *Fleischer Story*, 64.

67. Cabarga, *Fleischer Story*, 75.

68. Mark Langer, "Max and Dave Fleischer," *Film Comment*, 11, no. 1 (January–February 1975), 53.

69. Maltin, *Of Mice and Magic*, 110.

70. Langer, "Regionalism in Disney Animation," 308.

71. This account of the strike is drawn from Harvey Deneroff's, *Popeye the Union Man* and "We Can't Get Much Spinach," *Film History* 1, no. 1 (1987), 1–14, as well as Cabarga, *Fleischer Story*, 101–9.

72. Calpini quoted in Cabarga, *Fleischer Story*, 103.

73. Deneroff, *Popeye the Union Man*, 215. Despite these efforts, labor costs still grew out of control and contributed to substantial cost overruns.

74. *Ibid.*, 239–41.

75. Cobbett Steinberg, *Reel Facts: The Movie Book of Records*, updated ed. (New York: Vintage Books, 1982), 18.

76. Douglas W. Churchill, "Still More on the New York–Hollywood Tie-Up," *NYT*, December 17, 1939, 7.

77. For the Fleischer side of this dispute, which blames Paramount's duplicity on its desire to control future television rights, see Richard Fleischer, *Out of the Inkwell*, 113–36.

## Chapter 10: Film and Reality

1. The only other center of nonfiction production in the United States was Chicago, where Watterson Rothacker had organized the first such firm, the Industrial Moving Picture Company, in 1910. Of eighty-eight "Non Theatrical Producers" listed in the 1929 *FDYBK* (p. 894), fourteen had a Chicago-area business address, forty-two were based in and around New York, and two had offices in both cities. Only two Los Angeles producers were listed.

2. "The Weekly News Reel," *MPW*, July 21, 1917, 419–20.

3. For a useful survey of the newsreel operations of Hearst and his rivals, see Raymond Fielding, *The American Newsreel, 1911–1967* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1972).

4. Emmanuel Cohen, "The Business of International News by Motion Pictures," *JSMPE*, no. 28 (October 1926), 296.

5. The 1937 *Hindenberg* disaster was a rare example of a "sudden event" fully covered by professional newsreel cameramen, but only because they had been sent to Lakehurst, New Jersey, to film the dirigible's scheduled arrival. More typical would be the Tacoma Narrows bridge collapse, where newsreel editors had to purchase all their footage from local amateurs. Fielding, *American Newsreel*, 134–35.

6. See, for example, Francis A. Collins, *The Camera Man: His Adventures in Many Fields, with Practical Suggestions for the Amateur* (New York: Century, 1919); Charles Peden, *Newsreel Man* (New York: Doubleday Doran, 1932); Irving Crump, *The Boys' Book of Newsreel Hunters* (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1933); Wallace West, *Paramount Newsreel Men with Admiral Byrd in Little America* (Racine, Wis.: Whitman, 1934); Norman Alley, *I Witness* (New York: Wilfred Funk, 1941); Russell and Beverly Fernstrom, *Daredevil Cameraman: The Saga of Ray "Swede" Fernstrom* (Raleigh, NC: Pentland Press, 1997), esp. 50–62.

7. Austin Lescarbourea, *Behind the Motion Picture Screen* (New York: Munn, 1919), 236–37, describes this mirror business and other dirty tricks of newsreel cameramen.

8. Fielding, *American Newsreel*, 141–42. Fielding reports that Pathé's efforts caused as much trouble for its own men as for the competition (which might have been expected) and that Hearst and Fox got their footage into theaters first in any case.

9. Homer Croy, *How Motion Pictures Are Made* (New York: Harper, 1918), 252.

10. Edgar Dale, *The Content of Motion Pictures* (New York: Macmillan, 1935), 228–29.

11. Cohen, "Business of International News."

12. "Paramount Pictographs and Paramount Bray Pictographs," *The Blue Book of Short Subjects* (Boston: Famous Players Film Company of New England, n.d.).

13. Munsterberg was one of the first academics to deal seriously with motion pictures. In the same year he was working on the *Paramount Pictographs*, he pub-

lished *The Photoplay: A Psychological Study* (New York: Appleton, 1916).

14. Arthur Edwin Krows, "Motion Pictures—Not for Theaters," no. 12, *The Educational Screen* (October 1939), 284–88. Subsequent citations of this continuing series will give only the installment number, date, and page.

15. *The Blue Book of Short Subjects*.

16. Krows, no. 12 (October 1939), 284.

17. *ETR*, August 14, 1920, 1204, and August 28, 1920, 1389.

18. *ETR*, October 2, 1920, 1922; *AFI Catalog*.

19. *ETR*, January 1, 1921, 420f.

20. "Plans Film on Letter Mailing," *Wid's Daily*, June 6, 1921, 4.

21. Don Carlos Ellis and Laura Thornborough, *Motion Pictures in Education* (New York: Crowell, 1923), 32. In the 1980s, while serving as curator of the American Museum of the Moving Image, I removed from the auditorium of a Queens primary school a Powers 6B motion head, a silent-era 35mm projector that must have been installed there in the 1920s. It was still occupying its original location in the rear of the auditorium.

22. Edward Van Zile, *That Marvel—The Movies* (New York: Putnam's, 1923), 215–17.

23. Bryan quoted in Ellis and Thornborough, *Motion Pictures in Education*, 65.

24. Krows, no. 55 (March 1944), 115–17, 142.

25. Krows, no. 56 (April 1944), 161–62.

26. Leon Westfall, *A Study of Verbal Accompaniments to Educational Motion Pictures* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1934), 2–3. "New Type of Theatre for Newsreels Opens," *NYT*, March 16, 1931, 26, says RKO was behind the project.

27. Fielding, *American Newsreel*, 200–202.

28. For background on this tradition, see Charles Musser, in collaboration with Carol Nelson, *High-Class Moving Pictures: Lyman H. Howe and the Forgotten Era of Traveling Exhibition, 1880–1920* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991).

29. "Short Subject Releases," *FDYBK* (1924), 79–85.

30. Kevin Brownlow, *The War, the West and the Wilderness* (New York: Knopf, 1979), 464–71.

31. "Short Shots," *FD*, February 17, 1929, 3, says that *Simba* is being "Biophoned" at the Metropolitan studio.

32. Cooper quoted in Kevin Brownlow, "Grass: A Nation's Battle for Survival," in the catalog of the 22nd Pordenone Silent Film Festival (2003), 21.

33. According to Brown, an entire day was spent at the Astoria studio, where "they duplicated the interior [of a mountain cabin] from stills, duplicated the costumes, and stuck on beards and that was it." Quoted in Brownlow, *War, West, Wilderness*, 505–6. See also John White, "Myth and Movie Making: Karl Brown and the Making of *Stark Love*," *Film History* 19, no. 1 (2007), 49–57.

34. Richard Koszarski, *The Astoria Studio and Its Fabulous Films* (New York: Dover, 1983), 57 (Byrd); "Schoedsack Editing New Jungle Picture," *FD*, August 10, 1930, 9 (*Rango*); Angela Aleiss, *Making the White Man's Indian: Native Americans in Hollywood Movies* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2005), 41 (*Silent Enemy*); "Short Shots," *FD*, April 21, 1931, 7 (*Viking*).

35. Robert E. Sherwood, *The Best Moving Pictures of 1922–23* (Boston: Small, Maynard, 1923), 3.

36. Robert Flaherty, "Film: Language of the Eye," *The Screen Director* 6, no. 1 (January 1951), 6. This issue is a tribute volume to Flaherty published by the New York Screen Directors Guild. At the time of his death Flaherty was the guild's most distinguished member.

37. *AFI Catalog*.

38. See, for example, Jan-Christopher Horak, ed., *Lovers of Cinema: The First American Avant-Garde, 1919–1945* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1995), and Bruce Posner, ed., *Unseen Cinema: Early American Avant-Garde Film 1893–1941* (New York: Anthology Film Archives, 2001).

39. Flaherty quoted in Posner, ed., *Unseen Cinema*, 131.

40. Jan-Christopher Horak, "Paul Strand and Charles Sheeler's *Manhatta*," in *Lovers of Cinema*, ed. Horak, 267–86.

41. *Manhatta* (also known as *New York the Magnificent*) opened at the Rialto on July 24, 1921. *The Twenty-four Dollar Island* played the Roxy on December 3, 1927, but only in a cut version. Roxy Rothapfel was notorious for putting his mark on nearly every film he screened, and shorts were no exception. The uncut version was playing at a local art house by January 7. George Pratt, *Spellbound in Darkness: A History of the Silent Film* (Greenwich, CT: New York Graphic Society, 1966), 491, 535.

42. Hall quoted in Pratt, *Spellbound in Darkness*, 491.

43. Irving Browning, a member of Local 644 and later a founder of the Cameramart equipment rental house, presented an exhibition of his "stylized shots of the studios" at the Motion Picture Club that same year. "Last Week of Photography Exhibit," *FD*, May 26, 1931, 2. He was later a member of the Workers Film and Photo League, where he lectured and exhibited his collection of historic motion picture technology. "Screen Notes," *NYT*, December 20, 1934, 30.

44. William Uricchio, "The City Viewled," in *Lovers of Cinema*, ed. Horak, 287–314. Weinberg appears to have dismantled his New York film (which no longer exists) in order to reuse some of the footage in his Baltimore production, *Autumn Fire*, two years later.

45. "Up and Down New York," *FD*, June 7, 1931, 9; "Rhythms of a Big City," *FD*, August 23, 1931, 19; "Manhattan Medley a Cinema Gem," *FD*, January 29, 1932, 2. *Pathé Audio Review* #34 (August 17, 1930), included both *Shadows* and (in true news magazine style) footage of Thomas Armat describing how he invented the motion picture projector. On January 19, 1932, *FD* reported that J. D. Williams was producing an eight-reel feature about New York, *The Wonder City That Nobody Knows*, but no such film appears to have been released.

46. "Sightseeing in New York," *FD*, November 29, 1931, 20.

47. Lewis Jacobs, "Experimental Cinema in America," *Hollywood Quarterly* 3, no. 2 (Winter 1947–1948), 111–24, and 3, no. 3 (Spring 1948), 278–92. Under various titles the essay was more widely circulated in Roger Manvell, ed., *Experiment in the Film* (London: Grey Walls Press, 1949), 113–52, and Lewis Jacobs, *The Rise of the American Film: A Critical History* (1939; repr. New York: Teachers College Press, 1968).



48. Many of these films have been gathered on disc 5, "Picturing a Metropolis: New York City Unveiled," of the DVD set *Unseen Cinema: Early American Avant-Garde Film 1894–1941* (Image Entertainment, 2005).

49. *Variety*, June 1, 1927, quoted in Alexander Walker, *The Shattered Silents: How the Talkies Came to Stay* (New York: William Morrow, 1979), 26.

50. Hearst produced both the Universal and the MGM newsreels as late as 1929 ("Newsreels," *FDYBK* [1929], 556). When Fox briefly acquired MGM that year, Hearst dropped Universal and for a time was instead responsible for both the Metrotone and the Movietone newsreels ("Newsreels," *FDYBK* [1930], 638).

51. Howard T. Lewis, *The Motion Picture Industry* (New York: Van Nostrand, 1933), 133.

52. From "World Revenue Reports—Grand Totals," 1926/27 through 1936/37. Universal Studios, Archives and Collections, Universal City, CA.

53. "Metrotonenews, Inc.," *MPA* (1933), 554; Fielding, *American Newsreel*, 193.

54. "Locations and Assignments of Crews as of . . . January 12th 1931," Movietone News, author's collection.

55. Fielding, *American Newsreel*, 189–90.

56. Dale, *Content of Motion Pictures*, 220.

57. See Fielding, *American Newsreel*, esp. 270–75.

58. *Ibid.*, 215–19.

59. Alfred Gordon Bennett, *Cinematic: Aspects of Filmic Creation* (London: Jarrolds, 1937), 229–30.

60. Jay Leyda, *Films Beget Films: A Study of the Compilation Film* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1964), 9.

61. Of the 133 documentary features indexed in the *American Film Institute Catalog, Feature Films 1911–1920* (pp. 434–35), nearly all are travelogues or war film compilations.

62. Michael T. Isenberg, *War on Film: The American Cinema and World War I* (East Brunswick, NJ: Associated University Presses, 1981), 68–81.

63. See *AFI Catalog*.

64. *AFI Catalog*. Later Johnson films, including *Baboon* (1935) and *Borneo* (1937), were apparently synchronized at the Fox Movietone studio.

65. Leyda, *Films Beget Films*, 32.

66. Anthony Slide, "Stock Footage: A Vital Link," *AC*, February 1988, 83–88.

67. Dorothy Stone, "The First Film Library," *Films in Review* 2, no. 7 (August–September 1951), 29–35. See also the advertisement for the Film Library in *FDYBK* (1929), 931.

68. Theodore Straus, "History's Happy Hunting Ground," *NYT*, June 22, 1941, IX 3.

69. J. G. Capstaff and M. W. Seymour, "The Duplication of Motion Picture Negatives," *TSMPE*, no. 28 (October 1926), 223–29; J. I. Crabtree and C. H. Schwingel, "The Duplication of Motion Picture Negatives," *TSMPE* 19 (July 1932), 891–908.

70. Jay Leyda, *Kino: A History of the Russian and Soviet Film* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1960), 224. Schub incorporated much footage located in American news archives, including six previously unknown shots of Lenin.

71. Leyda, *Films Beget Films*, 22–27; Martin Stollery,

"Eisenstein, Schub, and the Gender of the Author as Producer," *Film History* 14, 1 (2002), 87–99.

72. "Fall of the Romanov Dynasty," *Circulating Film Catalog* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1984), 111.

73. William Alexander, *Film on the Left: American Documentary Film from 1931 to 1942* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), 25–27.

74. Frederick Lewis Allen, *Only Yesterday* (New York: Harper, 1931). Universal purchased motion picture rights to *Only Yesterday* in May 1932, but decided to produce a conventional narrative fiction rather than a documentary. After considerable work on the script, the studio simply adapted, without credit, the plot of Stefan Zweig's *Letter from an Unknown Woman*.

75. "The Cry of the World," *The Greater New Fox 1932–1933 Announcement* (Fox Film Corp., [1932]), n.p. Author's collection. See also *AFI Catalog*.

76. Leyda, *Films Beget Films*, 35. Leyda had not seen *The Cry of the World*.

77. See *AFI Catalog*. *World in Revolt* was made by Mentone Productions, a Universal affiliate based in New York that usually produced short films. Although the production drew on Universal personnel (Graham McNamee) and archival holdings, it was distributed on a states rights basis.

78. "The Worst Anti-Labor Photoplays of 1934," *Filmfront* 1, no. 2 (January 7, 1935), 2–3.

79. Leyda, *Films Beget Films*, 35–36. Leyda gives major credit to Fox newsreel editor Truman Talley and writer Laurence Stallings, whose picture book of the same title had recently been published. But de Rochemont also worked on the film, which is clearly central to his own body of work.

80. Quite a few compilation features were produced, but their financial success is hard to quantify. Universal's *The Fighting President* grossed only \$32,701.65, but at a cost of \$13,264.53 it was marginally profitable ("World Revenue Reports—Grand Totals, 1931/32 to 1935/36 Releases"). The *AFI Catalog* claims that *Mussolini Speaks* cost \$100,000 and grossed \$1 million; both figures are unsubstantiated. And Raymond Fielding bluntly characterizes *The Cry of the World* as "a catastrophic financial failure." Fielding, *The March of Time, 1935–1951* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 33.

81. "Universal Newspaper Newsreel Synopsis Sheet," vol. 3, no. 99. Author's collection.

82. See *AFI Catalog* for these films, as well as such similar New York-produced compilations as *Hell's Holiday* (1933) and *The Birth of a New America* (1934).

83. See *AFI Catalog* entries for these titles, where it is also noted that Edgar G. Ulmer claimed to have directed *Mussolini Speaks*. Credits to Jack Cohn and Lowell Thomas indicate that this was an East Coast picture.

84. This account follows that of Raymond Fielding in *March of Time*.

85. These dramatized news programs clearly influenced the Mercury Theatre's *War of the Worlds* radio broadcast, which Orson Welles presented in 1938. Indeed, many of the same actors worked on both the *March of Time* and the Mercury Theatre programs.

Some would also appear in the Welles film *Citizen Kane*, which features an insider's parody of *March of Time*.

86. Fielding, *March of Time*, 81.

87. "The First 59." Brochure describing the contents of the first two years of *The March of Time* (1936). Author's collection.

88. Luce quoted in Robert T. Elson, "De Rochemont's *The March of Time*," in *The Documentary Tradition, from Nanook to Woodstock*, ed. Lewis Jacobs (New York: Hopkinson & Blake, 1971), 108.

89. Fielding, *March of Time*, 74.

90. Paul Rotha, *Documentary Film* (Boston: American Photographic Publishing Company, 1936), 91–97.

91. Leyda, *Film Beget Films*, 43.

92. Fielding, *March of Time*, 69.

93. Frank Capra, *The Name Above the Title* (New York: Macmillan, 1971), 328; Joseph McBride, *Frank Capra: The Catastrophe of Success* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992), 481.

94. The Signal Corps Photographic Center, where most of its documentaries were produced, was located in the old Paramount studio in Astoria, close to sources of stock footage and editorial talent, although Capra himself spent most of his time at a smaller satellite facility in Los Angeles. Richard Koszarski, "Subway Commandos: Hollywood Filmmakers at the Signal Corps Photographic Center," *Film History* 19, nos. 3–4 (2002), 296–315.

95. Thomas M. Pryor, "Down the Homestretch," *NYT*, June 30, 1940, IX 3.

96. *AFI Catalog*.

97. For example, compare New York-produced television series like *Naked City* (1958–1963) and *The Defenders* (1961–1965) with contemporaneous Hollywood productions like *The Untouchables* (1959–1963) and *Perry Mason* (1957–1966).

98. Alexander, *Film on the Left*, 4–5. Both Alexander and Russell Campbell, in *Cinema Strikes Back: Radical Filmmaking in the United States, 1930–1942* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: UMI Research Press, 1982), see this activity as centered almost exclusively in New York.

99. Robert Gessner, "Movies about Us," *New Theatre* (June 1935), reprinted in *Documentary Tradition*, ed. Jacobs, 94.

100. Alfred Wagenknecht, head of the Relief Committee, quoted in Kevin Brownlow, *Behind the Mask of Innocence* (New York: Knopf, 1990), 505.

101. Brownlow, *Behind the Mask*, 506.

102. Harry Alan Potamkin, "A Movie Call to Action," *Workers Theatre* (July 1931), quoted in Alexander, *Film on the Left*, 7.

103. Julian Roffman quoted in Campbell, *Cinema Strikes Back*, 42.

104. Alexander, *Film on the Left*, 9–19. Whittaker Chambers was on the League's advisory board.

105. Edward Kern "Reviving Distinguished Films" (letter), *NYT*, December 16, 1934, X 4. Kern admits that the League was unable to obtain such films as *Metropolis*, *The Crowd*, *Greed*, and *A Woman of Paris*.

106. Seltzer interviewed by Campbell, quoted in Alexander, *Film on the Left*, 33.

107. Peter Ellis [Irving Lerner], "A Revolutionary Film," *New Masses*, September 25, 1934, 30.

108. "Screen Notes," *NYT*, May 6, 1935, 22.

109. Nancy Naumburg Goldsmith to Ruth Goldstein, September 6, 1975, Thomas Brandon Collection, Museum of Modern Art Film Study Center, NY.

110. Naumburg moved to Hollywood, where she married in 1939 and subsequently abandoned all interest in films. She later exhibited her documentary photography and wrote some plays for the Greater Norwalk (CT) Mental Health Association. Richard Koszarski, "Nancy Naumburg: Vassar Revolutionary," *Film History* 18, no. 4 (2006), 374–75.

111. Alexander, *Film on the Left*, 59.

112. Nancy Naumburg, ed., *We Make the Movies* (New York: Norton, 1937). Naumburg's surprising conclusions are buried at the end of the book's foreword.

113. Gessner, "Movies about Us."

114. Maurice Rapf, who observed the shooting, recalled Thatcher as the actual director. See Patrick McGilligan and Paul Buhle, *Tender Comrades: A Backstory of the Hollywood Blacklist* (New York: St. Martin's, 1997), 505.

115. Ralph Steiner and Leo Hurwitz, "A New Approach to Filmmaking," *New Theatre* (September 1935), reprinted in *New Theatre and Film, 1934 to 1937: An Anthology*, ed. Herbert Kline (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1985), 300–305.

116. Lerner quoted in Alexander, *Film on the Left*, 125–29. The Works Progress Administration (WPA), the New Deal's most ambitious jobs program, symbolized for filmmakers like Lerner the socially active government policies they hoped their films might promote.

117. Hans Schoots, *Joris Ivens: Living Dangerously* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2000), 110–11.

118. Alexander, *Film on the Left*, 121–25. See also Irving Lerner, "Dovzhenko's *Frontier*," *New Theatre* (January 1936), reprinted in *New Theatre and Film*, ed. Kline, 346–50.

119. *AFI Catalog*.

120. Alexander, *Film on the Left*, 153.

121. Schoots, *Joris Ivens*, 128–34.

122. *AFI Catalog*.

123. Alexander, *Film on the Left*, 164–65.

124. *Ibid.*, 167–68.

125. Quoted in Ben Belitt, "The Camera Reconnoiters," *The Nation* (November 20, 1937), reprinted in *Documentary Tradition*, ed. Jacobs, 142.

126. Alexander, *Film on the Left*, 206–42; Richard M. Barsam, *Nonfiction Film: A Critical History*, rev. ed. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), 148–51.

127. "Its funders removed it from distribution during the McCarthy era and only returned it to the filmmakers for circulation in the early 1960s," according to the Museum of Modern Art's *Circulating Film Library Catalog* (p. 128).

128. Steiner quoted in Alexander, *Film on the Left*, 179–85.

129. Robert L. Snyder, *Pare Lorentz and the Documentary Film* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1968), 21–78.

130. Erik Barnouw, *Documentary: A History of the*



*Nonfiction Film* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), 115.

131. Pare Lorentz to Erik Barnouw, September 14, 1983, letter in the author's collection. His editor was Leo Zochling, who had just completed *Soak the Rich* for Ben Hecht and Charles MacArthur. ESSI was then being operated as General Service Studios.

132. Irving Lerner, "The Plow That Broke the Plains," *New Theatre* (July 1936), reprinted in *New Theatre and Film*, ed. Kline, 315.

133. Rotha, *Documentary Film*, 71–115.

134. *Ibid.*, 109.

135. Alexander, *Film on the Left*, 244–47.

136. The break between Steiner and Van Dyke and the remaining members of Frontier Films was made even worse due to a squabble over whose property the commission actually was. Hurwitz, apparently, had been depending on the income to see Frontier Films through the difficult production of *Native Land*. Alexander, *Film on the Left*, 178–81.

137. The figure of \$250 originated with the *Daily Worker* and is cited in the *AFI Catalog* entry on *Taxi*. The *Catalog* incorrectly describes *Taxi* as a sound film.

138. Elia Kazan, *A Life* (New York: Knopf, 1988), 105.

139. According to Alexander, *Film on the Left*, 247, the slogan "Producers of Films in the Public Interest" was emblazoned on American Documentary Films's letterhead.

140. Alexander, *Film on the Left*, 69.

141. Edwin M. Bradley, *The First Hollywood Sound Shorts, 1926–1931* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2005), 464–66.

142. "Short Shots," *FD*, May 14, 1931, 64.

143. William F. Kruse, "The Motion Picture Industry and the School," in *Cinematographic Annual II*, ed. Hal Hall (Hollywood: American Society of Cinematographers, 1931), 115–23.

144. Westfall, *Verbal Accompaniments to Educational Motion Pictures*, 2.

145. "Most Sponsored Films Will Be Made in the East," *FD*, February 8, 1931, 5.

146. Brian Coe, *The History of Movie Photography* (Westfield, NJ: Eastview, 1981), 171; Bernard Brown, *Amateur Talking Pictures and Recording* (London: Pitman, 1933).

147. Krows, no. 54 (February 1944), 69–71.

148. Rick Prelinger, notes to Voyager CD-ROM, *Ephemeral Films* (1994). Prelinger does not mention the rape and voyeurism "gags" that constitute the film's bizarre story line.

149. Krows, no. 56 (April 1944), 161–63.

150. Krows, no. 29 (September 1941), 284–85.

151. Krows, no. 57 (May 1944), 207–9.

152. "Audio, Erpi Unit, Formed to Produce," *Motion Picture Daily*, August 24, 1933, 1. Audio Productions was based at ESSI until 1934, when it moved to 250 West 57th Street, Western Electric's home office. In January 1938 it returned to Astoria and took over management of the studio until it was acquired by the U.S. Army Signal Corps in 1942. "Of Local Origin," *NYT*, January 4, 1938, 18.

153. *MPA* (1938–1939), 1098, (1940–1941), 964.

154. Snody quoted in Thomas Pryor, "Tomorrow's Propaganda," *NYT*, June 18, 1939, 116. Perhaps one of Audio's resident sociologists also had a hand in the film. In the Middletons' home state of Indiana, the town of Muncie was the average American community profiled in Robert and Helen Lynd's landmark *Middletown* study (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1929).

155. Helen A. Harrison, *Dawn of a New Day: The New York World's Fair, 1930–40* (New York: New York University Press/Queens Museum, 1980), 74. The film included footage of Jesse Owens at the Berlin Olympics, the round-the-world flight of Howard Hughes, the 75th anniversary reunion of Gettysburg battle veterans, and similar newsreel items.

156. Pryor, "Tomorrow's Propaganda," gives the figure as two hundred films. But Richard Griffith, in a more detailed study published a few months later, claimed there were more than five hundred. "Films at the Fair," *Films* 1, no. 1 (November 1939), 61.

157. Griffith, "Films at the Fair," 62, 74–75.

158. Alexander, *Film on the Left*, 210, attributes the film to Lionel Berman, Ben Maddow, and Sidney Meyers.

159. Griffith, "Films at the Fair," 70–71; "Transportation Zone: Focal Exhibit," *Official Guidebook of the 1939 World's Fair* (New York: Exposition Publications, 1939), 199–201.

160. Pryor, "Tomorrow's Propaganda," 116.

161. Allen W. Palmer, "Cecil B. De Mille Writes America's History for the 1939 World's Fair," *Film History* 5, no. 1 (1993), 36–48. See also Sara Beth Levavy, "Land of Liberty in the World of Tomorrow," *Film History* 18, no. 4 (2006), 440–58.

162. Losey made this claim to his biographer, David Caute, in *Joseph Losey: A Revenge on Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 65–66. But two articles about the Experimental Film Project in the *New York Times* fail to mention Losey and quote Joris Ivens as the "consultant" responsible for it. "Hollywood Films to Aid Teaching," *NYT*, August 8, 1937, 75; Edward Harrison, "Movies in the Classroom," *NYT*, October 3, 1937, 174. According to the *Times*, the work was going on in an editing room at 1600 Broadway.

163. Michel Ciment, *Conversations with Losey* (London and New York: Methuen, 1985), 55.

164. Bosley Crowther, "Films for the Fair," *NYT*, March 5, 1939, V 5. Caute, *Joseph Losey*, 67, says that Losey earned \$10,000 for his work on the film, and Bowers was paid \$8,500.

165. Caute, *Joseph Losey*, 66. In the film, the oil companies get to keep two cents.

166. Griffith, "Films at the Fair," 72.

167. Caute, *Joseph Losey*, 70–72.

168. Archer Winsten, "The City Goes to the Fair," *New York Post*, June 23, 1939, reprinted in *Documentary Tradition*, ed. Jacobs, 126.

169. Museum of Modern Art, *Circulating Film Library Catalog*, 125.

170. Steiner quoted in Alexander, *Film on the Left*, 249–50.

171. John Grierson, "Dramatizing Housing Needs and City Planning," *Films*, 1, no. 1 (November 1939), 85–89.

# Chapter 11: Multicultural Revival

1. See, for example, Eric Goldman, *Visions, Images, and Dreams: Yiddish Film Past and Present* (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Press, 1983).

2. Was *The Phantom of Kenwood* ever released? The title is excluded from the extensive filmography offered by Pearl Bowser, Jane Gaines, and Charles Musser in *Oscar Micheaux and His Circle: African-American Film-making and Race Cinema of the Silent Era* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001). But a poster for the film in the collection of the Museum of the Moving Image describes it as an “all talking” production. Ron Green, in *Straight Lick: The Cinema of Oscar Micheaux* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), 241, dates it as 1933. Patrick McGilligan, in *Oscar Micheaux: The Great and Only* (New York: Regan, 2007), 262–63, believes that both *The Phantom of Kenwood* and *Harlem after Midnight* were completed in 1931–1932, before *Ten Minutes to Live*. Micheaux scholarship remains a work in progress.

3. See, for example, Mark Reid, *Redefining Black Film* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 16–17, which builds on a position developed earlier by Thomas Cripps. But this argument, which depends on a notion of racial purity, has become more difficult to support as historical resources improve. G. William Jones, curator of the Tyler, Texas, Black Film Collection, describes Alfred Sack, for example, as “a hands-off backer” who allowed Spencer Williams to direct such extraordinary films as *The Blood of Jesus* “as he saw fit.” G. William Jones, *Black Cinema Treasures: Lost and Found* (Denton: University of North Texas Press, 1997), 34. In any case, a film like *Murder in Harlem*, in which all the villains are white and a black policeman refers to the white members of the force as “these peckerwoods,” hardly seems under the thumb of white finance.

4. Quoted in Thomas Cripps, *Slow Fade to Black: The Negro in American Film, 1900–1942* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 327.

5. This is not to say that *Murder in Harlem* entirely lacks the rough edges usually associated with Micheaux. The director can still be heard on the sound track at least once, ordering “Cut!” as an actress walks out of the frame.

6. Matthew Bernstein, “Oscar Micheaux and Leo Frank,” *Film Quarterly* 57, no. 4 (2004), 8–21, outlines the parallels between the film and the Frank case, although what is more interesting to me is how the film diverges from this source.

7. Leo Frank, a New York Jew, was accused of murdering a female employee in the Atlanta pencil factory he managed. Although nationwide protests supported Frank’s innocence, he was tried and convicted (largely on the questionable testimony of the factory’s African American janitor), then seized and lynched by a mob determined to carry out vigilante justice. Although it is historically accurate in certain details, *Murder in Harlem* manages to ignore the most extraordinary element of the case: instead of a white man being lynched on the testimony of an African American, Micheaux offers the far more familiar story of a black man unfairly accused. See Steve Oney, *And the Dead Shall Rise: The Murder of Mary Phagan and the Lynching of Leo Frank* (New York:

Pantheon, 2003). But Micheaux also incorporates direct references to another sensational murder trial, the Loeb and Leopold case. The real killer in the film, a skinny white boy named “Baby Face” Epps, is obsessed with the notorious pair and is shot down by police (so we are told) while trying to free them from the Illinois State Prison! Although other character names used in the film are fictitious, Epps was the name of an actual figure in the Frank case.

8. According to Donald Bogle, “pure coons emerged as no-account niggers, those unreliable, crazy, lazy, subhuman creatures good for nothing more than eating watermelons. . . .” *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Film* (New York: Viking, 1973), 8.

9. A detailed plot summary of *Murder in Harlem*, illustrated with numerous frame enlargements, can be found in Jones, *Black Cinema Treasures*, 118–28 (although this summary does not exactly match the print viewed by the author).

10. “New Micheaux Film Enters Production,” *New York Amsterdam News*, December 1, 1934, 10. The film is discussed under its working title, *The Brand of Cain*.

11. Tucker and another actor, Andrew Bishop, had had too many drinks before leaving Harlem one morning for the studio. An accident on the George Washington Bridge delayed them further, and after arriving at the studio both men hid behind the scenery until they had sobered up. “He never forgave us for that one,” Tucker remembered. Quoted in Richard Grunpenhoff, *The Black Valentino: The Stage and Screen Career of Lorenzo Tucker* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1988), 114–15.

12. “Hollywood in the Bronx,” *Time*, January 29, 1940, 67–68.

13. “Motion Picture Withdrawn after Protest in New York,” *New York Age*, May 12, 1938. Reproduced in Phyllis R. Klotman, ed., *African Americans in Cinema: The First Half Century*, CD-ROM (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2003).

14. Peter Bogdanovich, “Edgar G. Ulmer: An Interview,” *Film Culture*, nos. 58–59–60 (1974), 221. Ulmer may have been confusing *Moon Over Harlem* with one of his other films. Numerous press accounts say the film was being made at the “Lido Studio” on 146th Street and Seventh Avenue (previously the Erbograp studio). See, for example, “Bud Harris to Take Lead in New Film,” *Chicago Defender*, February 4, 1939, 18.

15. Bogdanovich, “Edgar G. Ulmer,” 221.

16. A. H. Weiler, “Ticket for the Chariot,” *NYT*, August 3, 1941, IX 4.

17. After he finished shooting *I Want to Be a Mother* (1937), Seiden recycled some of his unused footage as a comedy short, *I Want to Be a Boarder*—a strategy employed by many other low-budget producers. J. Hoberman, *Bridge of Light: Yiddish Film between Two Worlds* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1991), 219.

18. Harold Seiden quoted in Goldman, *Visions, Images, and Dreams*, 79–81. Shooting while the building was otherwise empty would not have satisfied the fire code, but the strategy certainly made it harder to get caught.

19. Judith Goldberg, *Laughter through Tears: The*

*Yiddish Cinema* (East Brunswick, NJ: Associated University Presses, 1983), 77.

20. Joseph Seiden, "First Generation Talkies," *The Screen Director*, May 13, 1949, 5.

21. Hoberman, *Bridge of Light*, 206.

22. Goldman, *Visions, Images, and Dreams*, 132–41.

23. Goldberg, *Laughter through Tears*, 96.

24. Harry T. Smith, "'Talkies' in All Tongues," *NYT*, July 5, 1936, 4x.

25. Hoberman, *Bridge of Light*, 242.

26. See, for example, Hoberman, *Bridge of Light*, 235.

27. According to Ulmer, the window washers union was notably supportive. See Bogdanovich, "Edgar G. Ulmer," 209–13.

28. *Ibid.*, 212.

29. *Ibid.*, 213.

30. "The Screen," *NYT*, February 15, 1937, 12.

31. Bogdanovich, "Edgar G. Ulmer," 192.

32. Hoberman, *Bridge of Light*, 250.

33. Bernardi quoted in Goldman, *Visions, Images, and Dreams*, 115.

34. Ulmer remembered how *The Warning Shadow* had been lost to the laboratory and was not about to let that happen again. Bogdanovich, "Edgar G. Ulmer," 217–20. The Garment Workers Union, which was already sponsoring the long-running theatrical production *Pins and Needles*, advanced \$20,000 in exchange for five days' worth of benefit tickets.

35. Contner's BNC is now in the collection of the American Society of Cinematographers. Hollywood cameraman Gregg Toland acquired the second BNC and later used it to photograph *Citizen Kane*. Thanks for this information to Sol Negrin, ASC.

36. In addition to the monastery, the location was also within hailing distance of a nudist colony and the German-American Bund headquarters at Camp Nordland. The *Daily Mirror*, fascinated by this sort of juxtaposition, sent a photographer to shoot a full-page spread on the production, "Hollywood in Miniature," published on September 18, 1938. The page is reprinted in J. Hoberman and Jeffrey Shandler, eds., *Entertaining America: Jews, Movies, and Broadcasting* (Princeton: Princeton University Press; New York: Jewish Museum, 2003), 106.

37. Bogdanovich, "Edgar G. Ulmer," 214–16.

38. Goldman, *Visions, Images, and Dreams*, 118. This pattern continued on Ulmer's next Yiddish film, *The Light Ahead*, where Isidore Cashier was credited with "dialogue direction." The star of the film, David Opatoshu, told Eric Goldman, "Filmetrically, Ulmer staged it, but the acting, Izzy did" (120).

39. "At the Belmont Theatre," *NYT*, January 28, 1939, 19.

40. See *AFI Catalog*. In 1938 ESSI appears to have made an attempt to attract some of this foreign-language production. A few weeks after *Marusia* was completed, William Rowland's *Di que me quieres* went into production under the direction of Robert Snody. Not strictly an "ethnic" film, it was made primarily for the export market and was distributed by RKO. *AFI Catalog*.

41. The three films Bulgakov directed for Columbia were *White Lies*, *I'll Love You Always*, and *After the*

*Dance*, the last two starring Nancy Carroll. Ulmer told Bogdanovich that Bulgakov had acquired such airs in Hollywood that he became impossible to work with on the truly low-budget *Natalka Poltavka*. Bogdanovich, "Edgar G. Ulmer," 210–11.

42. *AFI Catalog*.

43. H.T.S., "At the Miami Theatre," *NYT*, March 8, 1937, 22; *AFI Catalog*; file 32590-511 (*Arsbin-Al-Malan* [sic]), Motion Picture Department Case Files, New York State Library, Albany.

44. Seiden, "First Generation Talkies."

45. Hoberman, *Bridge of Light*, 302.

46. In his interview with Bogdanovich ("Edgar G. Ulmer," 217), Ulmer suggests that the budget was even smaller than usual. "The assistant and I had to sleep in the same bed in a broken down hotel in Newark," he remembered, although it is unclear if he is referring to *The Light Ahead* or *Green Fields*.

47. T.M.P., "At the Ascot Theatre," *NYT*, September 23, 1939, 26. "Technically the picture is surprisingly good," the *Times* noted, but just a bit too long. Surviving prints are about thirty minutes shorter than the original release version.

48. Thomas M. Pryor, "Outside of Jericho," *NYT*, July 30, 1939, X 3.

49. Hoberman, *Bridge of Light*, 312.

50. Goldman, *Visions, Images, and Dreams*, 126.

51. Hoberman, *Bridge of Light*, 270.

## Chapter 12: A Miniature Hollywood

1. Sid Weiss, "Eastern Production," *Film Daily Production Guide and Director's Annual* (1937), 37 (hereafter *FD Annual*).

2. *FD Annual* (1934), 71, (1936), 35, (1937), 37.

3. Joseph Henabery, *Before, In and After Hollywood* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 1997), 297–98.

4. According to figures given in "Production Statistics," *FD Annual* (1936), 15, and "Eastern Production," *FD Annual* (1937), 37. The figure excludes cartoons and nonfiction production.

5. Weiss, "Eastern Production," 37.

6. Grant Whytock interviewed by Richard Koszarski, July 16, 1971.

7. Waller's group also produced many of the "Paramount Varieties" subjects, generally one-reel compilations like "Screen Souvenirs" (clips from silent movies), "Famous People at Play," and "Broadway Highlights."

8. *FD Annual* (1934), 71, (1936), 92.

9. Fred Waller moved "the entire short reel department of Paramount" back to Astoria from its headquarters on West 43rd Street in March 1935. "Para. Shorts Dept. Moves to Long Island," *Hollywood Reporter*, March 16, 1935, 6.

10. Despite the sincerity of their Ellington films, Paramount was still capable of surprisingly low racial humor, as in *Is My Face Black?* (released May 3, 1935), starring radio favorites Molasses 'n' January.

11. Ralph Walker, "The Birth of an Idea," in *New Screen Techniques*, ed. Martin Quigley (New York: Quigley, 1953), 112–17. Instead, the commission went to the Joseph Losey–Charles Bowers puppet film, *Pete Roleum and His Cousins*. See Chapter Ten.

12. Fred Waller, "Cinerama Goes to War," in *New Screen Techniques*, ed. Quigley, 119–26.

13. "Of Local Origin," *NYT*, March 20, 1939, 18. Titles included *See Your Doctor* and *Home Movies*.

14. Leonard Maltin, *The Great Movie Shorts* (New York: Crown, 1972), 168.

15. Peter J. Mooney interviewed by Richard Koszarski, March 1, 1979, collection of the Museum of the Moving Image, Astoria, NY.

16. Maurice Terenzio, Scott MacGillivray, and Ted Okuda, *The Soundies Distributing Corporation of America: A History and Filmography of Their "Jukebox" Musical Films of the 1940s* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1991), 2–6. Various producers on both coasts were contracted to make Soundies, although Minoco appears to have supplied the bulk of the material before 1942.

17. Information from Soundies production checklist, programs 1005–33 (1941), author's collection.

18. Terenzio et al., *Soundies Distributing Corporation*, 9.

19. Waller, "Cinerama Goes to War," 122.

20. Arthur Edwin Krows, "Motion Pictures—Not for Theatres," no. 10, *The Educational Screen* (June 1939), 193–94.

21. N. R. Danielian, *AT&T: The Story of Industrial Conquest* (New York: Vanguard Press, 1939), 152–54.

22. U.S. Federal Communications Commission, *Special Investigation—Docket No. 1. Report on Electrical Research Products, Inc. Part II. Trade Practices of the Bell System in Its Relations with the Motion Picture Industry* (January 30, 1937), 399–400. As of December 31, 1929, Metropolitan owed ERPI \$275,803.40.

23. *Ibid.*, 401, 445.

24. "Screen Notes," *NYT*, October 11, 1933, 26.

25. Marguerite Tazelaar, "Queens Lot Ready for Comedy under Pioneer of Pie-Throwing," *NYHT*, October 15, 1933.

26. *Ibid.* Before his death in 1919, Sidney Drew directed and starred in dozens of genteel domestic comedies for Metro and Vitagraph.

27. David Bruskin, *The White Brothers: Jack, Jules, and Sam White* (Metuchen, NJ: Directors Guild of America and Scarecrow Press, 1990), 143; "Skirball, Jack," *MPA* (1945–1946), 364.

28. Bruskin, *White Brothers*, 145.

29. Maltin, *Great Movie Shorts*, 12.

30. Frank S. Nugent, "The Slapstick Professor," *NYT*, May 5, 1935, IX 3.

31. For Seldes on Stoopnagle, see "The 'Errors' of Television," *Atlantic Monthly*, May 1937, 538.

32. "Film Gossip of the Week," *NYT*, August 15, 1937, 141.

33. Nugent, "Slapstick Professor."

34. The trend had been gathering momentum for several years. See "Short Sales Hurt by Double-Featuring," *FD*, March 3, 1931, 1.

35. "Of Local Origin," *NYT*, January 4, 1938, 18.

36. Only two "Cavalcade of Stuff" episodes were produced. Although the existing copy of the second has a Fox distribution credit, copyright records indicate that E. W. Hammons and Grand National were also involved.

37. "Blake, Ben K.," *MPA* (1945–1946), 21.

38. "Rex Film Corporation," *FD Annual* (1936), 100.

39. Maltin, *Great Movie Shorts*, 27.

40. William K. Everson, program note for *From the*

*Brink of Eternity*, New School for Social Research Film Series, November 20, 1981, Museum of Modern Art Film Study Center, NY.

41. Hyman Goldberg, "Hollywood in N.Y.—They Make Pictures over on 10th Avenue," *New York Post*, September 30, 1941.

42. "B. K. Blake, Inc.," *MPA* (1940–1941), 964.

43. See note to the entry for *Bring 'em Back Alive* in *AFI Catalog*.

44. RKO copyrighted six two-reel episodes of *Theatre of the Air* in 1935, and six one-reel episodes of *Amateur Parade* in 1936. Sources are unclear about which episode included Sinatra. According to Richard Havers, Sinatra appeared in two numbers featuring the Three Flashes, one called "The Night Club" and the other "The Minstrel." "Frank appeared as a waiter in one, and in the other, in blackface, he was part of a chorus of singers, making no significant vocal contribution." Havers, *Sinatra* (New York: DK Publishing, 2004), 36. But by the time the film was released, Sinatra had already appeared on Major Bowes's radio show, now a full member of the expanded and renamed Hoboken Four.

45. In 1933–1934 Universal also distributed the "Goofytone Newsreel," one short-film genre that parodied another, photographed by veteran New York cameraman Don Malkames. See the filmography in Michael G. Fitzgerald, *Universal Pictures: A Panoramic History in Words, Pictures, and Filmographies* (New Rochelle, NY: Arlington House, 1977), a useful compendium of data on Universal's shorts as well as its features.

46. "Short Shots," *FD*, August 22, 1933, 12.

47. "Soup for Nuts," *MPH*, July 14, 1934, 45.

48. "Eastern Production," *FD Annual* (1937), 37; "Schwartzwald, Milton," *MPA* (1945–1946), 350.

49. Skibo Productions, Inc. copyrighted ninety-six short films between 1933 and 1938, some of which are indistinguishable from typical Educational releases (for example, Pinky Lee in *Dental Follies*); others run as far afield as British anthropologist Julian Huxley's *The Private Life of the Gannets* (1934). According to one source, "Skirbo Productions" was based at the Biograph studio in 1936. *FD Annual* (1936), 444.

50. Irene Thirer, "Sam Sax's Film Factory Turns 'em Out Two a Week in Brooklyn," *New York Post*, April 30, 1935.

51. Henabery, *Before, In and After Hollywood*, 285–86.

52. Disney to Iwerks, September 20, 1928, quoted in Leslie Iwerks and John Kenworthy, *The Hand Behind the Mouse: An Intimate Biography of the Man Walt Disney Called "The Greatest Animator in the World"* (New York: Disney Editions, 2001), 67.

53. Bosley Crowther, "The Long and the Shorts of It in Flatbush," *NYT*, November 27, 1938, 173.

54. Other "tab" musicals included *Fifi* with Vivienne Segal (1932), a condensed version of *Mlle. Modiste*; *The Red Shadow* (*The Desert Song*, 1932); *Yours Sincerely* (*Spring Is Here*, 1933); *The Flame Song* (*Song of the Flame*, 1934); and even *A Swing Opera* (1939), a jazzed-up version of *The Bohemian Girl*.

55. These appearances could be compared with television guest shots of the 1960s or 1970s by celebrities who were no longer box-office draws, but simply "famous for being famous."



56. Crowther, "Long and Shorts of It."
57. *MGM Short Subjects/Warner Bros. Short Subjects* (Catalogue of Television Properties), n.d. Author's collection.
58. Lionel Stander, who appeared with Howard and Arbuckle in *In the Dough* (1933), was a frequent second banana in Vitaphone comedies before his appearance in *The Scoundrel*.
59. Crowther, "Long and Shorts of It."
60. Henabery, *Before, In and After Hollywood*, 291–94.
61. June Allyson, a show girl from the Bronx, made at least ten short films in New York for Warners and Educational before her Broadway success in *Best Foot Forward* (1941). The earliest may have been *Ups and Downs* (Roy Mack, 1937), with Hal Le Roy and Phil Silvers.
62. Davis was allowed to integrate this film because of his age. That same year he appeared opposite Ethel Waters in the all-black *Rufus Jones for President*.
63. Dee Lowrance, "Hollywood with Us via the Subway," *NYHT*, September 27, 1936.
64. Bruce Torrence, *Hollywood: The First Hundred Years* (New York: Zoetrope, 1982), 174–78.
65. "WB Moving Sam Sax to England as Prod. Head; B'klyn Studio to Close," *Variety*, March 15, 1939; "Phonovision Reels for Home Projection," *New York Post*, May 15, 1940.
66. Weiss, "Eastern Production," 37.
67. Henabery, *Before, In and After Hollywood*, 296–97.
68. See the filmography in Leonard Maltin, *Of Mice and Magic: A History of American Animated Cartoons* (New York: NAL, 1980), 406–9.

### Chapter 13: Radio Visions

1. "The Boston Television Party," *Radio News* 12 (May 1931), 986. Other stations were licensed but not necessarily transmitting.
2. "Television Studio Opened by Walker," *NYT*, July 22, 1931, 23.
3. Joseph H. Udelson, *The Great Television Race: A History of the American Television Industry, 1925–1941* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1982), ix.
4. "Far Off Speakers Seen as Well as Heard Here in a Test of Television," *NYT*, April 8, 1927, 1; "Amer. Telephone Tests Television," *Wall Street Journal*, April 8, 1927, 16. The New York end of this demonstration was at 55 Bethune Street.
5. "Far Off Speakers." Until around 1933, films involving television almost always featured it in its picture phone guise, including *Up the Ladder* (Universal, 1925), *Men Must Fight* (MGM, 1933), and *The Whispering Shadow* (Mascot, 1933). Richard Koszarski, "Coming Next Week: Images of Television in Pre-War Motion Pictures," *Film History* 10, no. 2 (1998), 128–40.
6. "Television Thrills Radio Crowd," *NYT*, September 21, 1928, 34.
7. "Television Stages a Talking Picture," *NYT*, September 25, 1931, 26.
8. Herbert S. Futran, "Nearing the Television Goal Line," *Motion Picture Projectionist*, December 1931, 21–22, 36. See also the display advertisement for Sanabria's demonstration at the Broadway Theatre, *NYT*, October 26, 1931, 22. The television projection was part of the stage show and was billed above the feature picture, RKO-Pathé's *The Tip-Off*, starring Eddie Quillan and Ginger Rogers.
9. "Broadway," *Variety*, October 27, 1931.
10. "Television Draws 1,700 to Theater," *NYT*, October 23, 1931, 26; Gerald Bordman, *American Theatre: A Chronicle of Comedy and Drama, 1930–1969* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 32–33; Futran, "Nearing the Television Goal Line."
11. "The 'Eye' Gains Prestige," *NYT*, July 16, 1933, X 7. In this account the 1931 demonstration is remembered as one in which "the lamp flickered and failed while an invited audience gasped that television had not yet turned the mythical corner."
12. Ibid. Only in the twenty-first century has digital projection, the modern equivalent of theater television, begun to replace motion picture film in American theaters.
13. "WRNY to Start Daily Television Broadcasts; Radio Audience Will See Studio Artists," *NYT*, August 13, 1928, 13. The station had sent out its first experimental broadcast two days earlier.
14. Ibid.
15. "Television on WRNY Wave," *NYT*, August 22, 1928, 10.
16. See the full-page advertisement for Pilot's television apparatus, "Pilot Pioneers Television," in *Radio News* 10 (October 1928), 298. Daven was the only manufacturer of home receivers with a display at the 1928 Radio Show (the other exhibitors were General Electric and Sanabria/Carter). See "Television Thrills Radio Show Crowd."
17. "Television Drama Shown with Music," *NYT*, August 22, 1928, 1. Dawley had worked with Tony Sarg on a series of "shadowgraph" puppet films, so it is possible that the show he staged for Daven used similar silhouette images.
18. "Television Makes Debut in Political Campaign," *NYT*, October 12, 1932, 48; "The 'Eye' Gains Prestige."
19. "Far-Off Speakers."
20. R. E. Charles, "Mr. Public Files His Report on First Television Hour," *New York Sun*, May 2, 1931. Charles was reporting on a Jenkins demonstration; the clipping is found in the Jenkins/De Forest Scrapbooks, Museum of the Moving Image, Astoria, NY (hereafter Jenkins Scrapbooks).
21. For a more detailed explanation of the various mechanical television processes, see Peter Yanczer, *The Mechanics of Television: The Story of Mechanical Television* (St. Louis: Peter Yanczer, 1987).
22. "Interest in Television Spreading over Nation," *Providence (RI) Journal*, April 20, 1930. Jenkins Scrapbooks.
23. Efforts by modern experimenters to re-create mechanical television systems or play back mechanical television recordings indicate that, at its best, pre-electronic television was capable of producing surprisingly effective moving images. See, for example, Don McLean's remarkable restoration of mechanical television recordings at [www.tvdawn.com](http://www.tvdawn.com). Unfortunately, most written descriptions date from the earliest and most primitive demonstrations of this technology.



24. Hugo Gernsback, "Television to the Front," *Radio News* 8 (June 1927), 1419.

25. "Blind broadcasting" was a label used by television advocates to suggest the new medium's superiority to the "incomplete" medium of radio. See, for example, D. E. Replogle, "Radio Images to Talk When They Go on the Air," *NYT*, April 12, 1931, X 14, and Richard Hubbell, *Television Programming and Production* (New York: Murray Hill, 1945), 44–53.

26. Albert Abramson, "Pioneers of Television—Charles Francis Jenkins," *JSMPE* 95, no. 2 (February 1986), 224–38.

27. C. Francis Jenkins, "Radio Photographs, Radio Movies, and Radio Vision," *TSMPE*, no. 16 (May 1923), 78–89. Jenkins founded the Society of Motion Picture Engineers in 1916 and served as its first president.

28. Jenkins had been interested in television for many years and published his first article on "Transmitting Pictures by Electricity" in *The Electrical Engineer* on July 25, 1894, even before he had perfected his motion picture projector.

29. Hugo Gernsback, "Radio Vision," *Radio News* 5 (December 1923), 681, 823–24. Watson Davis of *Popular Radio* also witnessed this demonstration and reported it in his own journal the same month. See also "Moving Pictures by Radio Successfully Demonstrated," *Variety*, June 21, 1923.

30. C. Francis Jenkins, *Radiomovies, Radiovision, Television* (Washington, DC: Jenkins Laboratories, 1929).

31. Jenkins, "Radio Photographs."

32. See, for example, Austin Lescarboua, "Current Radio-Television Developments," International News Syndicate, December 30, 1928, "Jenkins Tells of His Work to Make Television Practical," *Jersey City Journal*, February 4, 1929, and other clippings in the Jenkins Scrapbooks.

33. "\$10,000,000 Concern to Push Television," *NYT*, December 5, 1928, 3.

34. "Jenkins Television May Enter Movie Radio Field," *Los Angeles Examiner*, December 13, 1928. Jenkins Scrapbooks.

35. "Television Seeks Link with Screen," *New York Mirror*, December 14, 1928. Jenkins Scrapbooks.

36. "Jenkins Locates Television Plant in New Jersey," *NYHT*, January 6, 1929. Jenkins Scrapbooks.

37. "Shows Television to Commission," *Philadelphia Bulletin*, January 12, 1929. Jenkins Scrapbooks.

38. "Oppose Television on Broadcast Band," *NYT*, February 15, 1929; "Television Conference Stresses Limitations of Sight Via the Ether," *New York Evening World*, February 16, 1929. Jenkins Scrapbooks.

39. "Jenkins Tells of His Work."

40. "Television Now at Stage Equal to Radio's Status in 1921," *Jersey Journal*, March 8, 1929. Jenkins Scrapbooks. He later claimed that, despite their manufacturing cost of \$3.10, "I made money because I sold so many of them." C. Francis Jenkins, "The Development of Television and Radiomovies to Date," *JSMPE* 14 (March 1930), 345.

41. "The Story of Television in One Modern Home," *New York Sun*, August 16, 1930. Jenkins Scrapbooks.

42. "Ripples of Radio News Eddying in the Ether," *NYT*, May 17, 1929, X 23; "Television Programs Sent

out Regularly at Jersey City Plant," *Newark Evening News*, June 24, 1929. Jenkins Scrapbooks.

43. C. Francis Jenkins, "Television Due in Home within Few Months," *Brooklyn Standard Union* (April 1929?). Jenkins Scrapbooks.

44. "Television 'Movies' Create New Interest for Radio Listeners," *The Visugraphic*, July 1929, 1, 4.

45. "Story of Television in One Modern Home."

46. James W. Garside, "Recent Television Developments," *Camden (NJ) Press*, May 16, 1929. Jenkins Scrapbooks.

47. For an illustration of this apparatus and a description of the various home receivers sold by Jenkins, see D. E. Replogle, "Where Television Is To-Day," *Radio News*, January 1930, 629–31, 677.

48. George H. Clark, "C. Francis Jenkins—Television Adventurer," *Radio-Craft* 19, no. 4 (January 1948), 32–34, 120–21, 124–25.

49. "Television Has Director," *Baltimore News*, December 28, 1929. Jenkins Scrapbooks.

50. Irma Lembke Kroman quoted in Jeff Kisseloff, *The Box: An Oral History of Television, 1929–1961* (New York: Viking, 1995), 22–23.

51. William W. Harper, "A Year of Television," *Radio Manufacturer's Monthly* (July 1929?). Jenkins Scrapbooks.

52. "Home Talking-Television Set with Four-Inch Screen Shown," *New York Evening World*, December 12, 1929. Jenkins Scrapbooks.

53. According to the Jenkins advertisement in the radio section of the *Newark Sunday Call*, June 22, 1930, kits were available for as little as \$42.50, with slightly more elaborate receivers selling for \$75 and \$175. Jenkins Scrapbooks.

54. "Radio Talkies Shown to Public," *New York Sun*, January 18, 1930; "Radio 'Talkies' Reality Now," *Terre Haute (IN) Tribune*, January 23, 1930; "De Forest Sponsors First Television Program," *New York Sun*, February 15, 1930. Jenkins Scrapbooks.

55. "Television Broadcast of *Journey's End* to Be Attempted April 7 in Jersey," *Variety*, March 19, 1930. Jenkins Scrapbooks.

56. "Television Radio Broadcast Puts Speaker in View," unidentified clipping dated April 9, 1930. Local History Collection, Jersey City Public Library, Jersey City, NJ.

57. "Reception by Television Not Too Good," *Syracuse Journal*, April 10, 1930. Jenkins Scrapbooks.

58. Thornton Delehanty, "The Broadway Screen," *New York Evening Post*, April 19, 1930. Jenkins Scrapbooks.

59. Delehanty, "Broadway Screen"; Donald Kirkley, "Television Finds Its Way into the Theater's Realm," *Baltimore Sun*, April 20, 1930. Jenkins Scrapbooks.

60. Delehanty, "Broadway Screen."

61. "Hague Heads Program of Notables in Opening of Jersey City's First Television Theater," *Hudson (NJ) Dispatch*, April 8, 1930. Jenkins Scrapbook.

62. Kirkley, "Television Finds Its Way into the Theater's Realm."

63. Orrin Dunlap, "Radio Images That Talk Thrill London," *NYT*, April 6, 1930. Jenkins Scrapbooks.

64. Albert Abramson, *The History of Television, 1880–1941* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1987), 149.

65. "Television to Be Shown in Local Theater Lobby," *Newark (NJ) Call*, April 13, 1930. Jenkins Scrapbooks.
66. Irma Lembke Kroman quoted in Kisseloff, *The Box*, 22–23.
67. Udelson, *Great Television Race*, 52–53.
68. "City Crowds See 'Radio-Vision' Show," *NYT*, August 26, 1930, 29.
69. "Plan Television Program," *New York Morning World*, August 23, 1930; "Varied Bill to Come over Bank of Receivers," *New York Evening Journal*, August 23, 1930; "N.Y. Crowds Get First View of Television," *New York Evening Journal*, August 26, 1930; "Broadway Sees Television Show on a Small Scale," *NYHT*, August 26, 1930. Jenkins Scrapbooks. Ethel Barrymore and her daughter Ethel Barrymore Colt were scheduled, but did not appear.
70. "Television Shows Improvement over Last Year's Trial," unidentified clipping in Jenkins Scrapbooks. See also "Double Television Flop on B'way," *Variety*, August 27, 1930.
71. "Alone on the Air," *Newark (NJ) Call*, November 9, 1930. Jenkins Scrapbooks.
72. "Television Programs to Be Given Daily," *NYT*, February 24, 1931, 34; "Television on Air Daily from Passaic," *Clearfield (PA) Progress*, February 24, 1931. Jenkins Scrapbooks. Early film exhibitors would project footage taken from the front of a rushing locomotive and promote the results as a "phantom ride."
73. Austin Lescarbourea, "Television Grows Up!" *Radio News* 21 (May 1939), 6–10, 48. Lescarbourea was the author of a classic work on film technique, *Behind the Motion Picture Screen* (1919). Before getting this programming assignment, he had written, with Alfred Goldsmith, *This Thing Called Broadcasting* (New York: Henry Holt, 1930), in which he followed the RCA line by predicting that "normal" television operations were at least five years away. In his 1939 article he describes most mechanical television efforts as little more than stock swindles. "The public was left with bulging portfolios of stock certificates. *The stench was appalling.*"
74. "Television Makes History," *Christian Science Monitor*, March 28, 1931. Jenkins Scrapbooks. This film may have been a live-action Italian version of *Pinocchio* from 1911. The same article reports a broadcast of *Krazy Kat in Puss in Boots*. The Krazy Kat cartoons were produced by Hearst, who was cooperating with Jenkins Television. But there is no Krazy Kat film of this title, suggesting that the station simply relabeled an old print of Walt Disney's 1922 *Puss in Boots*.
75. "Newsreel Seen 30 Miles away by Television," *Chicago American*, April 15, 1931. Jenkins Scrapbooks.
76. "'Talkie' Films Will Be Used for Television," *Newark (NJ) Call*, March 15, 1931. Jenkins Scrapbooks.
77. D. E. Replogle, "Radio Images to Talk When They Go on the Air," *NYT*, April 12, 1931, X 14.
78. "Stage Stars Parade in Television Show," *NYT*, April 26, 1931, XX 9. See also De Forest press releases in Jenkins Scrapbooks.
79. "Stage Stars Parade."
80. "Radio Talkies Put on Program Basis," *NYT*, April 27, 1931, 26.
81. "Radio Talkies Put on Program Basis"; "2 Stations Open First Television Programs Here," *NYHT*, April 27, 1931. Jenkins Scrapbooks.
82. George Tichenor, "Television—The New Gold Mine," *Theatre Guild Magazine*, June 1931, 17–19. Tichenor's article is a survey of the local television scene and offers a rare account of the Jenkins studio operation in Passaic.
83. "Radio Images Win Battle with Storm," *NYT*, May 3, 1931. Jenkins Scrapbooks.
84. Charles, "Mr. Public Files His Report."
85. De Forest press release, Jenkins Scrapbooks.
86. "Today on the Radio," *NYT*, September 14, 1931, 25.
87. "Hearst to Get WGBS and Offer Television," *NYT*, October 10, 1931, 17.
88. In "Radiomakers Are Reconciled to Television," *Chicago Daily News*, March 20, 1930, K. A. Hathaway wrote that "[t]he general condition of business during the winter" had prevented Jenkins from expanding into the Midwest. Jenkins Scrapbooks.
89. "Television Camera Destroyed by Fire," *NYT*, January 23, 1932, 17; "De Forest in Jenkins Deal," *NYT*, February 1, 1932, 15.
90. The *Wall Street Journal* gave the very optimistic figure of 25,000–30,000 sets in use at this time. "Television Prospects," August 26, 1931, 11.
91. Udelson, *Great Television Race*, 63.
92. William S. Paley, *As It Happened* (New York: Doubleday, 1979), 52. In Paley's recollection, Fox was an old-style movie magnate attempting to fast-talk a twenty-six-year-old novice.
93. *Ibid.*, 53.
94. Michele Hilmes, *Hollywood and Broadcasting: From Radio to Cable* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990), 26–48, has a good discussion of this period, including the CBS-Paramount merger. But she has nothing to say regarding Paramount's subsequent disinterest in CBS or the Paley buy-back.
95. "Radio-Movies Are Combined in Unique Deal," *Christian Science Monitor*, January 5, 1928, 1.
96. "Deal to Link Radio to Film and Stage," *NYT*, October 7, 1928, N 9.
97. Lewis J. Paper, *Empire: William S. Paley and the Making of CBS* (New York: St. Martin's, 1987), 32.
98. Erik Barnouw, *A History of Broadcasting in the United States*, vol. 1, *A Tower in Babel, to 1933* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966), 232.
99. Warner quoted in "What Television Offers You," *Popular Mechanics*, November 1928, 820–24.
100. "Film Company Linked with Columbia Radio," *NYT*, June 15, 1929, 20.
101. "Television Ahead Leads to a Merger," *NYT*, June 23, 1929, XX 17.
102. Lafount quoted in J. D. Secrest, "Eager Eyes Focused on Television Films," *NYT*, November 9, 1930, XX 12.
103. S. B. Smith, *In All His Glory: The Life of William S. Paley, the Legendary Tycoon and His Brilliant Circle* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1990), 185.
104. "Columbia System Selects New Home," *NYT*, March 8, 1929, 32.
105. Bill Boddy, "'Spread Like a Monster Blanket over the Country': CBS and Television, 1929–1933," *Screen* 32, no. 2 (Summer 1991), 173–83. This article contains useful information from the NBC and CBS archives, but inexplicably misdates Paley's speech to

the Paramount convention as taking place in January 1929, five months too early.

106. "Stage and Screen Stars to Broadcast Mammoth Program," *Publix Opinion*, September 20, 1929, 1; "Ruggles Takes Post as Air M-of-C," *Publix Opinion*, October 4, 1929, 3. The last mention of the show in the *New York Times* appears in "Programs Scheduled for Broadcast This Week," September 21, 1930, R, 8, announcing what was apparently the final broadcast of September 23.

107. "Walker Will Open Television Station," *NYT* July 15, 1931, 21; "Television Studio Opened by Walker." Chevalier, Morgan, and Wynn were among the stars making features for Paramount in Astoria that season and would have been expected to show up. Mayor Walker, who did appear, was "unrecognizable," and "the picture fluttered constantly." "CBS Fails to Advance Date for Television," *Variety*, July 28, 1931.

108. "Television Studio Nearing Completion," *NYT*, April 14, 1931, 29. The sound for the inaugural broadcast was carried by WABC and fed to a network of eighty-four affiliates, but for subsequent broadcasts shortwave station W2XE was used. "Television Studio Opened by Walker."

109. "Paramount Puts Five on Columbia Board," *NYT*, August 22, 1929, 35; *FDYBK* (1930), 610.

110. *MPA* (1932), 34.

111. *Ibid.*, 40.

112. "Paley Completes Radio Chain Deal," *NYT*, March 9, 1932, 29; Smith, *In All His Glory*, 88–89; *Paper, Empire*, 34; Paley, *As It Happened*, 56–60.

113. Regina Crewe, "Television Latest Rage in Movies," *Atlanta American*, June 22, 1929. Jenkins Scrapbooks. Although a few projectors were on the market, talking home movies were not really practical until 1931. See John Brennan Jr., "Radio Points the Way to Talking Home Movies," *Radio News*, February 1931, 690–92, 742.

114. Reporting on an unusually clear 120-line transmission demonstrated on a cathode ray tube in 1932, the *Times* noted, "The audience was reported to be fairly well satisfied with the progress revealed, but the television images are said to suffer in comparison with home-talking pictures, which are often used to indicate the mark television experts must attain before they can consider their job well done." "Television Images Are Leaping from a Skyscraper Pinnacle," *NYT*, May 22, 1932, X 10. The "home movies" referred to were not amateur shots of the family picnic but reduction prints of commercial releases distributed by Eastman Kodak and other suppliers.

115. Udelson, *Great Television Race*, 59. According to "Television Studio Opened by Walker," CBS planned to broadcast silent tests every day from 2:00 to 6:00 p.m., and "regular daily presentations" from 8:00 to 11:00 p.m.

116. *Television News* (September–October 1932), 167, as quoted in Udelson, *Great Television Race*, 59.

117. "Television Eye Is Focused on Miniature Football Field," *NYT*, October 11, 1931, XX 11.

118. "Wide Radio Hook-up for World Series," *NYT*, September 28, 1932, 23.

119. "Election Returns Radioed to World," *NYT*, November 9, 1932, 17. The use of entertainers rather

than pundits or spinmeisters would probably be considered innovative even today.

120. "Democrats Will Use Television in Campaign Program Tonight," *NYT*, October 11, 1932, 12; "Television Makes Debut in Political Campaign." Rosamond Pinchot, "The Nun" in Max Reinhardt's production of *The Miracle*, was the niece of Governor Gifford Pinchot of Pennsylvania. As no television broadcasts were yet licensed for commercial purposes, it is unclear whether the Democratic Party paid for this event or how it was authorized. See also "Television Review," *Variety*, October 18, 1932.

121. Abramson, *History of Television*, 186.

122. Orrin Dunlap, "Television's Mail," *NYT*, August 7, 1932, X 7.

123. Orrin Dunlap, "Listening In," *NYT*, August 23, 1931, X 9. Dunlap, "Television's Mail," shows a picture of this prizefight staging.

124. Letters quoted in Dunlap, "Television's Mail."

125. Richard Hubbell, *4000 Years of Television: The Story of Seeing at a Distance* (New York: Putnam's, 1942), 99.

126. David Sarnoff, "Forging an Electric Eye to Scan the World," *NYT*, November 18, 1928, XX 3.

127. Albert Abramson, *Zworykin, Pioneer of Television* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995), 75–77. Accepting Zworykin's figures without argument, Sarnoff's approval was brief and to the point: "All right, it's worth it."

128. "Oppose Television on Broadcast Band," *NYT*, February 15, 1929. Jenkins Scrapbooks.

129. "Television Placed on Daily Schedule," *NYT*, March 22, 1929, 30.

130. "Images Dance in Space, Heralding New Radio Era," *NYT*, April 14, 1929, 159. Goldsmith credited Alexanderson, Conrad, and an RCA engineer named J. Weinberg with leading this television research. Zworykin and his activities were still top secret.

131. "Television Atop Theatre," *FD*, September 12, 1930, 11. *Film Daily* thought this move marked "the definite entrance of television in the American theater."

132. "Sarnoff for Radio Deal," *NYT*, April 19, 1930, 30.

133. David Sarnoff, "Sarnoff Discloses Plans for Nation-Wide Television," *NYT*, May 31, 1931, XX 9.

134. *Ibid.*

135. "Television Station for Empire State," *NYT*, July 10, 1931, 24. Readers should be aware that when King Kong clung to the top of the Empire State Building in RKO's 1933 film, he would have been careful to avoid RCA's recently installed television antenna.

136. "A Skyscraper Station," *NYT*, November 29, 1931, XX 7.

137. Orrin Dunlap, "Listening-In," *NYT*, May 15, 1932, X 10.

138. "Test Television Progress," *NYT*, May 18, 1932, 24; "Television Images Are Leaping."

139. "Television Images Are Leaping."

## Chapter 14: Live from New York

1. Others involved in American electronic television broadcasting during the 1930s included Philo T. Farnsworth and the Philco Radio Corporation in Philadelphia, and the Don Lee Broadcasting System in Los

Angeles. None of them operated in New York, which continued to be the focal point of national television.

2. Albert Abramson, *The History of Television, 1880–1941* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1987), 217–18.

3. “First Field Tests in Television, Costing \$1,000,000, to Begin Here,” *NYT*, May 8, 1935, 1.

4. “Sarnoff Predicts Television in 1940,” *NYT*, December 8, 1935, N 3. The facsimile service was considered a grave threat to the newspaper industry. Frank Waldrop and Joseph Borkin, in *Television: A Struggle for Power* (New York: William Morrow, 1938), 8–9, claimed that fear of this new technology was the reason 25 percent of current television licenses were owned by newspaper publishers.

5. Richard Koszarski, “Coming Next Week: Images of Television in Pre-War Motion Pictures,” *Film History* 10, no. 2 (1998), 128–40. Except for revue-style productions like *The Big Broadcast of 1936* (parts of which were shot at ESSI), the first American feature to predict television as broadcast entertainment was *The Singing Cowboy*, a Gene Autry Western released in May 1936, where Gene’s cowboy radio broadcast moves to a television station.

6. John S. Daggett, “Los Angeles First with Television Broadcast,” *Los Angeles Times*, December 27, 1931, 14.

7. Doug Douglas, “Great Changes Forecast in Entertainment Field,” *Los Angeles Times*, April 16, 1933, 26.

8. Larry Wolters, “Expert Explains New Television on Coast,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, July 12, 1936, 12. This was more a technological limitation than an aesthetic decision: Lubcke, like Farnsworth, had never developed a satisfactory camera tube.

9. “Television Show Goes Out, But Coast Fans Mum If They Get It,” *Variety*, September 26, 1933.

10. “Tele-Broadcasting of Films Now Being Undertaken Here,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 27, 1934, A 1.

11. *Ibid.* This article says the scanning speed was 16 frames per second (fps), but Lubcke’s system is generally said to have used a rate of 15 fps; see Daggett, “Los Angeles First with Television.”

12. Don Lee’s contributions to television history continue to be overlooked. Few histories contain any reliable information on W6XAO. Even the physical traces have vanished: only three Don Lee receivers survive today, out of 154 extant American prewar electronic television receivers documented by the Early Television Museum. See [www.earlytelevision.org](http://www.earlytelevision.org).

13. H. R. Lubcke, “The Theatrical Possibilities of Television,” *JSMPE* 25 (July 1935), 46–49.

14. “Fears of Television Allayed on Coast,” *NYT*, May 18, 1936, 14; “Television, from the Standpoint of the Motion Picture Production Industry,” *JSMPE* 27 (July 1936), 74–76.

15. “Television and Movies,” *NYT*, June 14, 1936, E 8.

16. Waldrop and Borkin, *Television*, 123–26.

17. “Television from the Standpoint of the Motion Picture Producing Industry,” *JSMPE* 29 (August 1937), 144–48.

18. “Television Expected to Rely on Motion Picture at Outset,” *Christian Science Monitor*, May 29, 1937, 3.

19. Edward Harrison, “Television about Two Years Away,” *Film Daily Production Guide and Directors Annual* (1936), 25.

20. Waldrop and Borkin, *Television*, 121, 124.

21. The corporate name was “DuMont,” but the founder signed his name “Allen B. Du Mont.” For a survey of DuMont’s truncated corporate history, see David Weinstein, *The Forgotten Network: DuMont and the Birth of American Television* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2004).

22. Jeff Kisseloff, *The Box: An Oral History of Television, 1929–1961* (New York: Viking, 1995), 63–68. In his interview with Kisseloff, DuMont vice president Thomas Goldsmith remembered Paramount’s investment as \$55,000 in cash for an equal number of DuMont shares. An April 1939 article in *Fortune* says that Paramount agreed to four annual \$50,000 payments (\$14,000 for stock, the balance as a loan), of which only the first had yet been made. “Television I: A Three Million Dollar ‘If,’” 176.

23. “Television I,” 178.

24. Orrin Dunlap, “The Swing to California,” *NYT*, October 17, 1937, 190.

25. A photo of this transmitter (much smaller than the enormous spike constructed after World War II) graced the cover of *Electronics* in July 1936. To install it, Sarnoff had to evict Major Armstrong and his FM apparatus, which led to a bitter and expensive battle that lasted for years. See Lawrence Lessing, *Man of High Fidelity: Edwin Howard Armstrong, a Biography* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1969).

26. Thomas Hutchinson, *Here Is Television, Your Window to the World* (New York: Hastings House, 1950), 231 (NBC); “Tours of WCBW, CBS-Television,” *Televi-ser* 2, no. 2 (November–December 1945), 14–15 (CBS).

27. “Television Stages First Real ‘Show,’” *NYT*, July 8, 1936, 21.

28. Hutchinson, *Here Is Television*, 140.

29. Kisseloff, *The Box*, 47.

30. Orrin Dunlap, “Telefilmed Faces,” *NYT*, September 20, 1936, X 13.

31. Goodwin quoted in Kisseloff, *The Box*, 48.

32. “Notable Television Advance Demonstrated,” *Radio World* 29, no. 9 (December 1936), 35.

33. “Television Show Seen by 200 Here,” *NYT*, November 7, 1936, 19.

34. Hildegard quoted in Kisseloff, *The Box*, 47.

35. Edwin Reitan Jr., “Preserving the History of Television at UCLA,” *IEEE Transactions on Consumer Electronics* CE-30, no. 2 (May 1984), esp. 4–6. By 1939, NBC was working with 800 foot-candles. “Visitors Take Part in Television Show,” *NYT*, May 4, 1939, 19. Richard Hubbell, perhaps recalling later practice, suggests that only 350 to 500 foot-candles were “desirable” at this time. *Television Programming and Production* (New York: Murray Hill, 1945), 57.

36. “RCA Television Demonstration Smart Tie-Up with NBC’s 10th,” *Variety*, November 11, 1936. This account also mentions the Ink Spots as appearing on the broadcast, although it seems likely that the group was present only on film.

37. “Television Progress,” *NYT*, November 7, 1936, 16.

38. “Test of Television’s 441-Line Images Begins,” *NYT*, January 24, 1937, X 12. This article also reveals that there were now fifty field test receivers in opera-



tion. R. R. Beal, "RCA Developments in Television," *JSMPE* 29 (August 1937), 121–43, provides an excellent description of working conditions in the 30 × 50 × 18-foot studio.

39. Will Baltin, "Sight and Sound News," *Radio News* 21 (May 1939), 32–33, provides a blow-by-blow account of what was already considered a historic broadcast, down to the Mickey Mouse cartoon and Bob Crosby musical.

40. "Shadowing a Sleuth," *NYT*, November 28, 1937, 196; Hutchinson, *Here Is Television*, 173–74.

41. "Shadowing a Sleuth."

42. "Television Unit Ready," *NYT*, December 9, 1937, 26; Hutchinson, *Here Is Television*, 61–63.

43. Hutchinson, *Here Is Television*, 65–67.

44. "Television Picks up Fire Scene," *NYT*, November 16, 1938, 25.

45. C. W. Farrier, "NBC Television Sets the Pace," *Radio News* 21 (May 1939), 28–29, 62–63. Farrier mistakenly gives the date of the fire as September. Erik Barnouw, *Tube of Plenty: The Evolution of American Television* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975), 85, includes a photo of the fire taken from the screen.

46. "Youth 11 Hours on Ledge Leaps 17 Floors to Death as Thousands Watch Him," *NYT*, July 27, 1938, 1. According to W2XBS producer Thomas Hutchinson, "the cameras showed us her [*sic*] falling body" (*Here Is Television*, 222), although why he identifies Warde as a woman is unknown. A photo of Warde on the ledge, taken directly from the screen, was widely circulated as an example of television's ability to cover breaking news. See Daniel Blum, *Pictorial History of Television* (Philadelphia: Chilton, 1959), 9. Coming full circle, the Warde suicide, slightly edited, was the basis of both Henry Hathaway's 1951 film *14 Hours* and a 1955 television drama called *Man on the Ledge* (Blum, *Pictorial History of Television*, 204).

47. Bob Landry, "Mummy Case, Television's Equivalent of *Great Train Robbery*, Shown in N.Y.," *Variety*, May 25, 1938. See also "Gains in Television Shown to Audience," *NYT*, May 18, 1938, 22.

48. Hutchinson, *Here Is Television*, 176.

49. Orrin Dunlap, "Eyes on Broadway," *NYT*, June 12, 1939, 150.

50. Baltin, "Sight and Sound News," 52; Goldsmith quoted in Kisseloff, *The Box*, 66. In fact, the cabinetry of DuMont's home receivers always resembled that of British sets, even in the early postwar period.

51. "Television Sets Ready," *NYT*, June 2, 1938, 38; Robert Eichberg, "\$125 Television Receiver Now on the Market?" *Radio-Craft* 10, no. 2 (August 1938), 74.

52. "Telecasts to Be Resumed," *NYT*, August 21, 1938, 132.

53. David Fisher and Marshall Fisher, *Tube: The Invention of Television* (Washington, DC: Counterpoint, 1996), 270–71.

54. "Public Television to Start in Spring," *NYT*, October 21, 1938, 25.

55. Wilbur Rowe, "The DuMont Receiver," *Radio News* 21 (May 1939), 21.

56. "News from the Market: Television Now Drops Mantle of Mystery," *NYT*, April 30, 1939, X 12.

57. Sarnoff quoted in Fisher and Fisher, *Tube*, 277–78.

58. "Television Service Here Starts with Fair Debut," *NYT*, April 18, 1939, 11.

59. "Telecasts," *NYT*, April 23, 1939, 134.

60. Kisseloff, *The Box*, 66–67.

61. Joseph H. Udelson, *The Great Television Race: A History of the American Television Industry, 1925–1941* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1982), 145–46; Harry Castleman and Walter J. Podrazik, *Watching TV: Four Decades of American Television* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1982), 11–12; Allen B. Du Mont, "Design Problems in Television Systems and Receivers," *JSMPE* 33 (July 1939), 66–74.

62. "Notes on Television," *NYT*, February 4, 1940, 128.

63. Kisseloff, *The Box*, 55 (Revuers); "Televiews of Pictures," *NYT*, September 3, 1939, X B (Maslin).

64. Blum, *Pictorial History of Television*, 8.

65. McLaren (Montreal: NFB, 1980), 10. McLaren's *NBC Valentine Greeting* is available on the DVD set *Unseen Cinema: Early American Avant-Garde Films, 1894–1941* (Image Entertainment, 2005). Although McLaren's stylized white-on-black graphic might have seemed appropriate for black-and-white television, Zworykin's Iconoscope would not have handled the film's severe tonal contrasts very well.

66. Padula quoted in Kisseloff, *The Box*, 60.

67. "First Television of Baseball Seen," *NYT*, May 18, 1939, 29.

68. Red Barber and Robert Creamer, *Rhubarb in the Catbird Seat* (New York: Doubleday, 1968), 55–58; "First Workout for Commercials on Television," *Variety*, August 30, 1939.

69. Orrin Dunlap, "Outside Looking In," *NYT*, October 29, 1939, X 12.

70. Castleman and Podrazik, *Watching Television*, 20–21.

71. Blum, *Pictorial History of Television*, 9.

72. Regina Crewe, "Television Latest Rage in Movies," *Atlanta American*, June 22, 1929, announced that Warners had purchased "television rights" to Fannie Hurst's *Give This Little Girl a Hand*. Jenkins/De Forest Scrapbooks, Museum of the Moving Image, Astoria, NY. The Don Lee broadcasts of 1933–1934, cited earlier, were only engineering tests.

73. Hungerford quoted in Kisseloff, *The Box*, 54, 60. Chesterfield's *Death from a Distance* (1935), a science fiction thriller, was chosen as the first feature film broadcast over WNBT (the old W2XBS) following the authorization of commercial television (9:00 p.m., Wednesday, July 2, 1941).

74. "Notes on Television," *NYT*, May 5, 1940, 163.

75. "Telecasts to Be Resumed," *NYT*, August 21, 1938, 132 (Mickey Mouse); "Telecasts for the Week," *NYT*, April 28, 1940, 128 (*Ugly Duckling*).

76. "Hollywood Plays Ostrich But Disney Goes Ahead," *World Film News and Television Progress*, June 1936, 12. Tino Balio, in his history of United Artists, refers to this dispute as "a foolish quibble over a minor detail," although control of television rights must not have seemed so insignificant to the parties at the time—or later. *United Artists: The Company Built by the Stars* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1976), 136–37.

77. "Movie Transmitted as a Television Test," *NYT*,



June 1, 1938, 21; “Tele-Film Tested,” *NYT*, June 5, 1938, 162.

78. “Notes on Television,” *NYT*, February 4, 1940, 128 (*Abraham Lincoln*); “Notes on Television,” *NYT*, March 17, 1940, 140 (*King of Kings*).

79. “On the Television Front,” *NYT*, August 13, 1939, X 10 (*La grande illusion*); “Notes on Television,” *NYT*, March 17, 1940, 140 (*La fin du jour*).

80. Kisseloff, *The Box*, 54.

81. Cobbett Steinberg, *Reel Facts: The Movie Book of Records*, updated ed. (New York: Vintage, 1982), 32.

82. “Notes on Television,” *NYT*, March 17, 1940, 140. Only 450 of these 1,350 forms were actually returned. By comparison, a year earlier the BBC received 4,000 completed forms in response to a similar survey. “Television Programmes,” *The Times* (London), May 3, 1939, 12e.

83. “Notes on Television,” *NYT*, March 17, 1940, 140; “A Year of Television,” *NYT*, April 28, 1940, 128; Bill Eddy quoted in Kisseloff, *The Box*, 56–57 (smoke).

84. Hutchinson, *Here Is Television*, 176; Keith Geddes and Gordon Bussey, *Television: The First Fifty Years* (Bradford: National Museum of Photography, Film, and Television, 1986), 9.

85. For a detailed account of the staging of one of these dramas, see Thomas Lyne Riley’s description of his production of *The Farmer Takes a Wife* in John Porterfield and Kay Reynolds, eds., *We Present Television* (New York: Norton, 1940), 168–77.

86. The technical quality of the film is high enough to suggest that this was not the first time this cameraman had attempted such a recording. The image is well framed, there are no apparent roll bars, and the monitor screen appears unusually flat. Perhaps the film was made by a professional working for RCA—or for a rival, like DuMont or CBS.

87. William Hawes, *American Television Drama: The Experimental Years* (University: University of Alabama Press, 1986), 203–11. Bundsmann, or Mann, also directed teleplays of *Jane Eyre* (October 12 and December 6, 1939), *A Criminal at Large* (November 17, 1939), and *Prologue to Glory* (February 23, 1940). See also “Televiews of Pictures,” *NYT*, August 27, 1939, X 10.

88. Art Hungerford quoted in Kisseloff, *The Box*, 58; “Notes on Television,” *NYT*, February 4, 1940, 128.

89. Gordon quoted in W. C. Dorf, “The Video Reporter,” *Radio News* 21 (May 1939), 10.

90. Dunlap, “Outside Looking In.”

91. Hutchinson, *Here Is Television*, 275–76, describes this barter arrangement as beneficial for both sides, helping NBC fill fifteen hours of airtime each week, publicizing the products featured in these films, and establishing a working relationship between the network and future commercial sponsors.

92. See “Television Report, Orders, Rules, and Regulations,” *JSMPE* 37 (July 1941), 95.

93. Goldsmith quoted in Kisseloff, *The Box*, 67.

94. “The Dumont-Wanamaker Bombshell,” *Televiser* 2, no. 1 (September–October 1945), 43. The station’s call letters were later changed to WNEW; today it is part of the Fox network.

95. Barnouw, *Tube of Plenty*, 103–4.

96. “Grand Central Is Site of Television Studio,” *NYT*, August 22, 1937, X 10.

97. “Television II: Fade In on Camera One!” *Fortune*, May 1939, 72. In the summer of 1937 CBS broadcast Seldes’s radio adaptation of *The Taming of the Shrew*. See Michael Kammen, *The Lively Arts: Gilbert Seldes and the Transformation of Cultural Criticism in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), esp. 256–73.

98. Gilbert Seldes, “The ‘Errors’ of Television,” *Atlantic Monthly*, May 1937, 53.

99. Rudy Bretz quoted in Kisseloff, *The Box*, 73.

100. Gilbert Seldes, *The Movies Come from America* (New York: Scribners, 1937), 111 (italics in the original). This definition of television conflicts with the one he gave in his *Atlantic* essay, written almost simultaneously, where he did insist that television was “a combination of radio and the moving picture.”

101. *Ibid.*, 113. Seldes felt that Hollywood’s current idea of a good movie was downright lethargic. “The only well-paced and snappy productions are the unimportant studio jobs which are not derived from the classics,” he wrote, privileging culturally disreputable B movies in a way later developed by critics like Manny Farber.

102. *Ibid.*, 111.

103. “Grand Central Is Site of Television Studio.” The unsupported floor span was 225 × 60 feet.

104. Cameraman Bob Bendick quoted in Kisseloff, *The Box*, 73.

105. “Television II,” 72. This page also features a startling photo of the vacant “studio.” For the finished studio, see Hubbell, *Television Programming and Production*, plate XIV.

106. “Television I,” 178.

107. Gilbert Seldes, “Past and Present,” in *Television USA: 13 Seasons* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1962), 11, 13.

108. Bendick quoted in Kisseloff, *The Box*, 73.

109. Seldes, “Past and Present,” 12.

110. Directors Guild of America, *Worthington Miner*, interviewed by Franklin Schaffner (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1985), 160–64. Miner was hired by Seldes in late August 1939. For friction between the Miner and Seldes factions, see Kisseloff, *The Box*, 75.

111. Hubbell, *Television Programming and Production*, 14 (italics in the original).

112. *Ibid.*, esp. 85–90. Hubbell’s book may be the first American text to reference the “Kuleshov experiment” outlining the power of montage (23).

113. *Ibid.*, 15. Seldes was a strong supporter of the Museum of Modern Art; there are only five people mentioned in the acknowledgments page of *The Movies Come from America*: Chaplin, Disney (actually the Disney studio), Joseph Cornell, and the key figures behind the MOMA Film Library, John Abbott and Iris Barry.

114. *Ibid.*, caption to plate XXVII.

115. Seldes, “Past and Present,” 11. Seldes remained as head of programming until 1945.

116. Leaman quoted in Kisseloff, *The Box*, 76.

117. Bob Bendick quoted in Kisseloff, *The Box*, 78.

118. Anhalt quoted in Kisseloff, *The Box*, 77. After the war Anhalt became a screenwriter in Hollywood, where he won two Academy Awards.

119. Seldes later claimed that “we could not use film as part of live programs” and that films were restricted to Saturday afternoon broadcasts (“Past and Present,” 12). This may have been true in the beginning, if the station had no separate transmission chain devoted to film (as NBC had), but improvements occurred rapidly.

120. See Seldes, “Past and Present,” 10–11, and Carl Beier quoted in Kisseloff, *The Box*, 75. Beier claims to have observed Condon “shooting up” before going on the air.

121. Anhalt and Leaman quoted in Kisseloff, *The Box*, 76–77. The Dali exhibition, which featured considerable nudity, never made it on the air.

122. Hutchinson, *Here Is Television*, 226–29. This, of course, is far more convention coverage than any of the commercial broadcast networks now offer.

123. Marian Seldes quoted in Kisseloff, *The Box*, 79; Seldes, “Past and Present,” 10.

124. Richard Hubbell, *4000 Years of Television: The Story of Seeing at a Distance* (New York: Putnam’s, 1942), 193.

125. “Color Television Success in Test,” *NYT*, August 30, 1940, 21.

126. D. B. Thomas, *The First Colour Motion Pictures* (London: Her Majesty’s Stationery Office, 1969).

127. Abramson, *History of Television*, 118, 230, 243, 252–53.

128. Peter C. Goldmark, *Maverick Inventor: My Turbulent Years at CBS* (New York: Saturday Review Press, 1973), 54–65; Fisher and Fisher, *Tube*, 305–8.

129. Abramson, *History of Television*, 262–64.

130. Anhalt quoted in Kisseloff, *The Box*, 74.

131. “Color Television Success in Test.”

132. “Television I,” 180; “Inadequate Telecasts Blamed for Slow Sales,” *NYT*, August 27, 1939, X 10.

133. “Television Receiver Prices May Be Reduced 35% Soon,” *Christian Science Monitor*, December 2, 1939, 10.

134. “Price Cut Sharply on Television Sets,” *NYT*, March 13, 1940, 38. See also display advertisements in *NYT*, March 20, 1940, 21, 22.

135. “Cuts Spur Television,” *NYT*, March 24, 1940, 51.

136. Udelson, *Great Television Race*, 146–50.

137. Anhalt quoted in Kisseloff, *The Box*, 74; Gilbert Seldes, *The Great Audience* (New York: Viking, 1950), 175; *Worthington Miner*, 153.

138. Paley continued to promote field-sequential color in the postwar era, eventually achieving a brief, costly victory in 1951. See the discussion in Fisher and Fisher, *Tube*, 299–322.

139. “Slow Demand Shown for Television Sets Despite Much Interest,” *Wall Street Journal*, May 3, 1939, 7. A few weeks later the *Journal* continued to find “the buying of all types of television sets is extremely meager.” “High Installation Costs and Short Programs Handicap Television,” May 20, 1939, 5.

140. “Television in Store Carries Hat Styles,” *NYT*, April 27, 1939, 28; “Television Merchandising Due,” *NYT*, July 1, 1939, 20. These films were the first commercial advertisements specifically produced for television, albeit a closed-circuit system. The in-house monitors were referred to as “kinets.” Farnsworth continued to emphasize this approach throughout the war in its “She Can Be 5 Places at Once” advertisements.

141. Abramson, *History of Television*, 236; “Television Images of Life-Size Shown,” *NYT*, February 15, 1939, 20.

142. “Television Makes Cinema Debut to Cash Customers,” *Christian Science Monitor*, February 24, 1939, 1; “Television for 350 Cinemas,” *The Times* (London), February 27, 1939, 14g. But Allen Eyles, in *Gaumont British Cinemas* (London: Cinema Theatre Association, 1996), 115–16, claims that only forty installations were projected.

143. “Television Shows in Movies Planned,” *NYT*, April 5, 1939, 26.

144. “Television Progress Speeded Up.” It was at this same meeting that Peter Goldmark first demonstrated live color television using his field-sequential system.

145. The New Yorker Theatre was located at 254 West 54th Street and should not be confused with the later West Side revival theater of the same name. Oddly enough, two years after the NBC demonstration the theater was acquired by CBS as a radio and television studio and renamed CBS Studio 52. Its best-known incarnation was as the site of the disco club Studio 54. Mary Henderson, *The City and the Theatre: New York Playhouses from Bowling Green to Times Square* (Clifton, NJ: James White, 1973), 262.

146. “Television Show Given in Theatre,” *NYT*, May 10, 1941, 17.

147. Hutchinson, *Here Is Television*, 320.

148. “Preview of the Newest Development in Theatre Entertainment, RCA Television,” May 9, 1941, souvenir program in author’s collection. Although RCA’s theater television system utilized direct projection, some processes demonstrated in Europe at this time were “intermediate.” A television signal transmitted to the theater was photographed onto motion picture film, rapidly developed, and projected (as film) almost immediately, collapsing the distinction between “film” and “television” almost entirely, at least as far as the audience was concerned. See, for example, Dr. Alfred Gradenwitz, “The Fernseh-A.G. Television System” in *Television Today: Practice and Principles Clearly Explained*, ed. Edward Molloy (London: George Newnes, 1935), 259–61. Introduced to America some years later, intermediate film systems were not employed here before the war.

149. “RCA Sees Commercial Television Retarded by Defense Program,” *NYT*, May 7, 1941, 27.

150. “Television Starts Today,” *NYT*, July 1, 1941, 15.

151. Hubbell, *4000 Years of Television*, 198.

152. On January 5, 1942, NBC began broadcasting instructions on “how to extinguish an incendiary bomb” to 123 receivers placed in fifty different police stations around the city. Hubbell, *4000 Years of Television*, 195.

153. “Television I” and “Television II” *Fortune*, April and May 1939.

## Chapter 15: “We Have a City Here”

1. U.S. Federal Communications Commission, *Investigation of the Telephone Industry in the United States*, 76th Cong., 1st sess., House Document no. 340 (1939), 410–12 (hereafter FCC, *Investigation of the Telephone Industry*).

2. Frank Waldrop and Joseph Borkin, *Television: A Struggle for Power* (New York: William Morrow, 1938), 160.
3. N. R. Danielian, *AT&T: The Story of Industrial Conquest* (New York: Vanguard Press, 1939), 163.
4. During the years 1933–1935, General Service Studios posted a loss of \$245,701, and Eastern Service Studios a loss of \$321,230. These losses were partially offset by licensing fees and income from the Exhibitors Reliance Corporation. FCC, *Investigation of the Telephone Industry*, 412.
5. "Paramount Board Elects Otterson," *NYT*, June 5, 1935, 29.
6. FCC, *Investigation of the Telephone Industry*, 409–11.
7. "Of Local Origin," *NYT*, January 4, 1938, 18.
8. Sid Weiss, "Eastern Production," *Film Daily Production Guide and Director's Annual* (1937), 37.
9. "News of the Screen," *NYT*, May 15, 1937, 23. The *Times* also reported that Harold Orlob would film *Artists and Models* at Astoria for Paramount, but I have been unable to verify which sequences of this revue picture, if any, were actually made there. "News of the Screen," *NYT*, June 20, 1936, 22.
10. See *AFI Catalog* entries for these films.
11. "Portion of Para. Pix May Be Done in East," *Hollywood Reporter*, March 19, 1935, 1.
12. "Movie Survey in Jersey," *NYT*, April 20, 1935, 17.
13. Douglas W. Churchill, "Hollywood Still Eyes the East," *NYT*, May 26, 1935, XI 3.
14. It was in connection with this article that *Life* publisher Roy Larsen was arrested for promoting obscenity. He was later acquitted.
15. Eric Schaefer, "Bold! Daring! Shocking! True!" *A History of Exploitation Films, 1919–1959* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), 187–91.
16. Earlier examples include *Suspicious Mothers* (aka *Reckless Decision*, 1933), produced by High Art Pictures Corporation, *Enlighten Thy Daughter* (1934), made at the Photocolor studio in Hastings-on-Hudson, and *This Nude World* (1933), a compilation documentary on international nudism with local footage shot by Bill Steiner. Surveys of exploitation films in this period reveal hardly any such production in the East. See Schaefer, *Bold! Daring! Shocking! True!* as well as Felicia Feaster and Bret Wood, *Forbidden Fruit: The Golden Age of the Exploitation Film* (Baltimore: Midnight Marquee Press, 1999), 36. Oddly enough, *This Nude World* was produced by Michael Mindlin, who had created the art cinema movement in the late 1920s when he opened the Fifth Avenue Playhouse and many other early revival houses. See Tony Guzman, "The Little Theatre Movement: The Institutionalization of the European Art Film in America," *Film History* 17, nos. 2–3 (2005), 261–84.
17. Thomas M. Pryor, "The Up Beat in Astoria," *NYT*, August 28, 1938, X 4 (investment); "Screen News Here and in Hollywood," *NYT*, May 17, 1938, 26 (Technicolor).
18. Peter J. Mooney interviewed by Richard Koszarski, March 1, 1979, collection of the Museum of the Moving Image, Astoria, NY.
19. See *AFI Catalog* entries for *Marusia* and *Di que me quieres*. Also, for the latter, see Juan Heinink and Robert Dickson, *Cita en Hollywood* (Bilbao: Mensajero, 1990), 266–67.
20. Pryor, "Up Beat in Astoria."
21. Robert W. Dana, "Astoria Blossoms Once More as the Hollywood of the East," *NYHT*, October 23, 1938.
22. "Screen News Here and in Hollywood," *NYT*, August 19, 1938, 13.
23. Pryor, "Up Beat in Astoria"; Dana, "Astoria Blossoms Once More."
24. B. R. Crisler, "Film Gossip of the Week," *NYT*, October 2, 1938, IX 5. Paramount was in a sense also their landlord, because ERPI and Audio were still only leasing the facility.
25. The title, which officially includes those curious ellipses, was drawn from President Franklin Roosevelt's second inaugural address and his invocation of "one third of a nation ill-housed, ill-clad, and ill-fed."
26. "California Sunshine Becomes a Drug on the Market," *Pic*, December 27, 1938, 13 (cost of . . . *one third* . . .); "Back Door to Heaven," *Time*, May 1, 1939, 69 (cost of *Back Door*).
27. "Back Door to Heaven." Sylvia Sidney told historian Robert Sklar that not only was Floyd Odium's money invested in . . . *one third of a nation* . . . , but his yacht stood in for one owned by the young millionaire in the film. Sidney interviewed by Sklar, February 12, 1985, collection of the Museum of the Moving Image, Astoria, NY.
28. The *March of Time* docudrama *The Ramparts We Watched* was feature length, but despite its reliance on performance and narrative, would generally have been considered a mere documentary.
29. Bland Johaneson, "Aces from Hollywood Revive Industry Here," *New York Daily Mirror*, November 27, 1938.
30. Gerald Bordman, *American Theatre: A Chronicle of Comedy and Drama, 1930–1969* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 162.
31. Orlob quoted in Dana, "Astoria Blossoms Once More."
32. Peter Sidney, "One Third of a Nation," *Daily Worker*, February 13, 1939, in . . . *one third of a nation* . . . clipping file, Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts (hereafter Billy Rose Collection, NYPL).
33. *NYHT*, February 13, 1939, untitled clipping in . . . *one third of a nation* . . . clipping file, Billy Rose Collection, NYPL.
34. *New York World-Telegram*, November 22, 1938, untitled clipping in . . . *one third of a nation* . . . clipping file, Billy Rose Collection, NYPL.
35. *Variety*, June 22, 1938, untitled clipping in . . . *one third of a nation* . . . clipping file, Billy Rose Collection, NYPL.
36. *New York Sun*, February 11, 1939, untitled clipping in . . . *one third of a nation* . . . clipping file, Billy Rose Collection, NYPL.
37. "A Noble Experiment," *NYT*, February 5, 1939, IX 4.
38. This is the characterization of John Wakeman in *World Film Directors*, vol. 1 (New York: H. W. Wilson, 1987), 479–84, one of the few discussions of Howard's career.

39. William K. Howard, "Filming in Astoria," *TAC* (December 1938), reprinted in Richard Koszarski, ed., *Hollywood Directors, 1914–1940* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), 337–40.

40. "From Film to Legit," *NYHT*, February 20, 1938, untitled clipping in *Back Door to Heaven* clipping file, Billy Rose Collection, NYPL. Hollywood had demanded too many "compromises and concessions," Howard claimed. Eileen Creelman, "Picture Plays and Players," unidentified clipping, *ibid*.

41. Creelman, "Picture Plays and Players." Walker had been associated with East Coast production since Fort Lee days. He appeared in several of Howard's first films in the early 1920s (in Hollywood) and had recently produced such local features as *Mr. Broadway* and *The Yiddish King Lear*. He also appears to have had a similar, unpublished, connection to . . . *one third of a nation*. . . .

42. Pryor, "Up Beat in Astoria."

43. Interviews with John Bright focusing on his political activities and partnership with Robert Tasker can be found in Lee Server, *Screenwriter: Words Become Pictures* (Pittstown, NJ: Main Street Press, 1987), 67–92, and Patrick McGilligan and Paul Buhle, *Tender Comrades: A Backstory of the Hollywood Blacklist* (New York: St. Martin's, 1999), 128–54.

44. One report even refers to "Mr. Wiles, a director with a good many revolutionary but practical ideas." Dana, "Astoria Blossoms Once More."

45. Hal Mohr, "New York Technical Facilities O.K.," *International Photographer*, March 1939, 5–6.

46. *Ibid*.

47. Howard, "Filming in Astoria."

48. Leonard Maltin, "Conversations: Jimmy Lydon," *Leonard Maltin's Movie Crazy*, no. 13 (Summer 2005), 2. In 1938 Lydon had appeared on Broadway with Sidney Lumet in Joseph Losey's *Sunup to Sundown*. See the photograph in Michel Ciment, *Conversations with Losey* (London and New York: Methuen, 1985), 53. After *Back Door to Heaven*, he worked at ESSi again in the Technicolor industrial film *The Middleton Family at the New York World's Fair*.

49. Every night in the studio screening room Howard would run footage of Patricia Ellis singing, a performance the rest of the company referred to as "vespers." Aline MacMahon to Richard Koszarski, telephone interview, October 23, 1979.

50. At one point Howard told a reporter that "Robert Montgomery is tremendously interested" in the title role. This may or may not have been press blather—Montgomery had been interested in revamping his image—but Howard later insisted that "Wallace Ford was the man I wanted." Pryor, "Up Beat in Astoria"; Creelman, "Picture Plays and Players."

51. John Mosher, *New York Journal-American*, April 22, 1939, untitled clipping in *Back Door to Heaven* clipping file, Billy Rose Collection, NYPL.

52. *Variety*, March 15, 1939, untitled clipping in *Back Door to Heaven* clipping file, Billy Rose Collection, NYPL.

53. Archer Winsten, "Back Door to Heaven Opens at Criterion," undated clipping in *Back Door to Heaven* clipping file, Billy Rose Collection, NYPL.

54. Creelman, "Picture Plays and Players."

55. The family album claim was promoted in the film's press book. Howard's friends, lovers, and business associates also made appearances in the film. In addition to Patricia Ellis, Johnnie Walker played a tough prison trustee, and Jack Entratter, at whose Stork Club Howard regularly wine and dined, was a cop. See William K. Everson, program notes for "Back Door to Heaven," New School for Social Research Film Series, December 17, 1976, Museum of Modern Art Film Study Center, NY; and William Crisler, "Wm. K. Howard and Other News Items," *NYT*, December 4, 1938, X 9.

56. See Siegfried Kracauer's chapter on "From Rebellion to Submission," in *From Caligari to Hitler: A Psychological History of the German Film* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1947), 115–28.

57. According to Patrick McGilligan, the genesis of *You Only Live Once* was Theodore Dreiser's suggestion to Walter Wanger that his current star, Sylvia Sidney, would be perfect for a screen version of the life of Bonnie Parker and Clyde Barrow. Wanger hired Gene Towne and Graham Baker (writers of the earlier William K. Howard/Sylvia Sidney success *Mary Burns, Fugitive*), who then proceeded to "rework their earlier hit shamelessly." McGilligan, *Fritz Lang: The Nature of the Beast* (New York: St. Martin's, 1997), 240–41. So if *Back Door to Heaven* may seem at times reminiscent of *You Only Live Once*, it is also true that Lang's film had roots in the earlier Howard picture.

58. Creelman, "Picture Plays and Players."

59. Her song, an especially lugubrious ballad called "I Need a Friend," is a chilling evocation of the lack of meaningful human contact that dogs every character in the film.

60. Dana, "Astoria Blossoms Once More."

61. Everson, program notes for "Back Door to Heaven." According to Eric Schaefer, exploitation specialist Dwain Esper acquired . . . *one third of a nation* . . . , changed the title to *House of Shame*, and promoted it with such lines as "I'm tired of sleeping in a one-room flat and my brother watching me undress!" *Bold! Daring! Shocking! True!* 60. What Esper, or anyone else, could have done to juice up *Back Door to Heaven* is unimaginable.

62. "La Guardia Visits First Film Studio," *NYT*, September 22, 1938, 25.

63. Wanger shared space in the United Artists studio with Samuel Goldwyn. The footage may have been intended for Goldwyn's *They Shall Have Music*, a film that would not be released for another year.

64. Tino Balio, *United Artists: The Company Built by the Stars* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1976), 140–41, 174–76.

65. Matthew Bernstein, *Walter Wanger, Hollywood Independent* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 115–16, 135–36.

66. H. Mark Glancy, "Hollywood and Britain: MGM and the British 'Quota' Legislation," in *The Unknown 1930s: An Alternative History of the British Cinema, 1929–39*, ed. Jeffrey Richards (London: Tauris, 1998), 57–72.

67. Robert Murphy, "Under the Shadow of Hollywood," in *All Our Yesterdays: 90 Years of British Cinema*, ed. Charles Barr (London: British Film Institute, 1996), 57–58.



68. *FDYBK* (1951), 85, 90. Statistics from a slightly different perspective quoted by Ian Jarvie in “Will Hays’ Economic Foreign Policy,” *Film History* 2, no. 3 (1988), 218, show that the drop in films produced by “non-majors” was especially extreme at this moment, falling from 208 in 1936–1937 to 127 in 1937–1938. Such producers would have been more likely to make use of rental studios.

69. Thomas Pryor, “France Invades Astoria,” *NYT*, March 19, 1939, 136.

70. “News of the Screen,” *NYT*, April 18, 1939, 27. Aisner eventually wound up in Hollywood, where he worked as “technical adviser” on films like *Casablanca*.

71. “Wall St. Groups Putting up Coin,” *Variety*, September 12, 1939.

72. “Horizon Enlarged by Group Theatre,” *NYT*, April 12, 1939, 26; “Film Plans Made by Group Theatre,” *NYT*, July 8, 1939, 23.

73. Douglas Churchill, “Still More on the New York–Hollywood Tie-Up,” *NYT*, December 17, 1939, 127. The film was discussed under its working title, *And So Goodbye*. See also Thomas Pryor, “Astoria’s Annual Upturn,” *NYT*, September 3, 1939, IX 3, and “Screen News,” *NYT*, October 16, 1939, 22.

74. “Of Local Origin,” *NYT*, September 26, 1939, 29. The loss amounted to twenty full-time jobs, a figure occasionally inflated to as many as a hundred when the stages were busy.

75. “Screen News,” *NYT*, October 16, 1939, 22.

76. “Mayor Asks Film Industry to Return to New York Where It Started,” *NYT*, October 17, 1939, 27.

77. Bosley Crowther, “Luring Hollywood,” *NYT*, November 5, 1939, VII 19.

78. Douglas Churchill, “Hollywood Billet Doux,” *NYT*, November 19, 1939, X 5.

79. “A.F.L. Pledges Aid to Lure Movies Here; Virtually Assures Five-Year Labor Peace,” *NYT*, November 17, 1939, 2.

80. Murray Ross, *Stars and Strikes: Unionization of Hollywood* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1941), 199–202.

81. Frank Farrell, “Furnish Studio to Attract Movie Makers,” *New York World-Telegram*, December 2, 1939.

82. “Movie Trend East Is Noted by Mayor,” *NYT*, January 9, 1940, 27.

83. “Film Production in City Is Assured,” *NYT*, January 12, 1940, 15.

84. “Making Films Here Put Up to Schenck,” *NYT*, December 8, 1939, 36.

85. “Movies Will Be Made in the City, Mayor Says, Asking Union Aid,” *NYT*, November 11, 1939, 1.

86. “Mayor to Start Film Firm Here If Others Balk,” *NYHT*, November 12, 1939.

87. “Furnish Studio to Attract Movie Makers.”

88. “Movie Trend East Is Noted by Mayor.”

89. “Film Men Call on Mayor,” *NYT*, January 20, 1940, 11.

90. “Making Films Here Put Up to Schenck.”

91. Mike Nielsen and Gene Mailes, *Hollywood’s Other Blacklist: Union Struggles in the Studio System* (London: British Film Institute, 1995), 16–18.

92. *Ibid.*, 18.

93. Gertrude Jobs, *Motion Picture Empire* (Hamden, CT: Archon, 1966), 343–56.

94. Otto Friedrich, *City of Nets: A Portrait of Hollywood in the 1940’s* (New York: Harper & Row, 1986), 66.

95. *Ibid.*, 65.

96. Sigmund Meyerson, Talmadge studio electrician, interviewed by Sam Robert, October 21, 1963, collection of the Museum of the Moving Image, Astoria, NY.

97. The figure seems to have come from the unions, which were promoting the idea even before La Guardia began his own campaign. See, for example, Pryor, “Astoria’s Annual Upturn,” and George Meaney’s remarks in “Labor Backs Movie Drive,” *NYT*, November 12, 1939, 9.

98. “Movie Trend East Is Noted by Mayor.”

99. “Golden Sees Mayor on Films for City,” *NYT*, December 23, 1939, 8.

100. Pryor, “Astoria’s Annual Upturn”; “Screen News Here and in Hollywood,” *NYT*, September 25, 1939, 22; H. R. Crisler, “The Cinema’s Magic Case-ments,” *NYT*, December 3, 1939, 161.

101. Churchill, “Hollywood Billet Doux”; “Screen News Here and in Hollywood,” *NYT*, January 23, 1940, 24.

102. Universal eventually filmed *Angela*, without Skirball, as *This Is the Life* (1944).

103. “Of Local Origin,” *NYT*, October 21, 1939, 12. Al Christie’s last credit was *Hands of Destiny*, a short film on handwriting analysis that was shot in New York by George Webber and distributed by Paramount in 1941.

104. “Film Production in City Is Assured.”

105. “Of Local Origin,” *NYT*, January 31, 1940, 23.

106. Richard Koszarski, “Rowland Brown,” in *Cinema: A Critical Dictionary*, ed. Richard Roud, vol. 1 (London: Secker and Warburg, 1980), 156. Howard and Brown actually knew each other in New York at this time. A *Times* reporter covering Howard’s preparations for *Back Door to Heaven* in 1938 described Brown in conference with Howard at the director’s Hotel Pierre office. Pryor, “Up Beat in Astoria.”

107. “Hecht and Jessel to Make Film Here,” *NYT*, November 14, 1939, 19.

108. Thomas M. Pryor, “Bronx Spring-Cleaning and Other Film News,” *NYT*, March 31, 1940, IX 5.

109. *Ibid.* See also “Mischa Elman, Brailowsky Here,” *NYT* October 17, 1939, 27, and “Austrian Nazis Find Foe Took His Assets,” *NYT*, May 9, 1938, 6. Székeley’s name is sometimes given as Székely in different newspaper accounts.

110. “Film News and Comment,” *NYT*, May 5, 1940, 158; William MacAdams, *Ben Hecht: The Man Behind the Legend* (New York: Scribners, 1990), 205–8.

111. Also aborted that season was *The Accidental Father*, a film promoted by Nat Ross for production at Biograph, to which the names of Constance Bennett, Hal Mohr, and director Richard Wallace were loosely attached. Pryor, “Bronx Spring-Cleaning.”

112. MacAdams, *Ben Hecht*, 207.

113. The New York Pictures Corporation, George Jessel, and Fritz Mandl were no longer connected with the film after Columbia took it over. Mandl, however, did go into the film industry on his return to Argentina, where he made some of Eva Perón’s early films and became a close supporter of the Perón dynasty.



114. “Prince Hohenloe Here with Bride,” *NYT*, November 5, 1939, 41; “Screen News Here and in Hollywood,” *NYT*, August 5, 1940, 10. Wilmos Székeley should not be confused with another Hungarian film refugee, István Székeley, who worked in Hollywood under the name Steve Sekely.

115. Thomas M. Pryor, “By Way of Report,” *NYT*, September 27, 1942, X 4; William K. Everson, “Movies out of Thin Air,” *Films in Review* 6, no. 4 (April 1955), 177. But Bosley Crowther, reviewing the film for the *Times*, felt it “ingeniously and effectively re-edited.” “The Screen: *Potemkin* Modernized,” *NYT*, August 25, 1943, 17. See also “*Potemkin* Is Modernized,” *NYT*, May 8, 1943, 19; “Of Local Origin,” *NYT*, July 22, 1943, 14;

116. Duncan Underhill, “Movies Scoff at New York,” *New York World-Telegram*, February 10, 1940.

117. “La Guardia to Head Home Defense,” *NYT*, May 20, 1941, 1.

118. Bordman, *American Theatre*, 176–77.

119. “Queens Studio to Be Rival to Hollywood: Mayor Achieves Goal; Banks Provide Cash for Gregory Ratoff,” *New York World-Telegram*, August 16, 1941; Thomas Pryor, “By Way of Report,” *NYT*, August 24, 1941, 142; Thomas Pryor, “Local Midway Chatter,” *NYT*, October 5, 1941, IX 5.

120. “Queens Studio to Be Rival to Hollywood.”

121. Pryor, “By Way of Report,” *NYT*, August 24, 1941, 142.

122. Pryor, “Local Midway Chatter.”

123. Mohr, “New York Technical Facilities O.K.”

124. “Long Island City Studio Makes Industrial Training Films,” *QueensBorough*, June 1941, 34.

125. “Journalists Are Signed,” *NYT*, January 28, 1941, 23.

126. Mooney interviewed by Koszarski.

127. Among the few features shot in New York during the war years were the musical reviews *Stage Door Canteen* and its low-budget successor, *Follies Girl* (both

1943). Producer Sol Lesser spent five weeks at the Fox Movietone studio shooting on a re-creation of the American Theatre Wing’s Service Men’s Canteen in order to film Katherine Cornell, Tallulah Bankhead, Helen Hayes, and other East Coast celebrities (filming could not take place inside the actual canteen). A duplicate of this same set was also built in Hollywood to accommodate West Coast talent. “Manhattan Bound,” *NYT*, January 10, 1943, X 3. *Follies Girl*, produced and directed by William Rowland, had a considerably less impressive talent roster (Wendy Barrie, Doris Nolan, and Fritz Scheff). Although it also made use of the “servicemen’s canteen” angle, most of the plot occurs in or near a burlesque house. Photographed by the ubiquitous George Webber, the film has the look and feel of an overgrown Soundie.

128. For a history of the SCPC, see Richard Koszarski, “Subway Commandos: Hollywood Filmmakers at the Signal Corps Photographic Center,” *Film History* 14, nos. 3–4 (2002), 296–315.

129. Col. Emmanuel Cohen, “Film Is a Weapon,” *Business Screen* 7, no. 1 (1945), 43.

130. These statistics are from Cobbett Steinberg, *Reel Facts: The Movie Book of Records*, updated ed. (New York: Vintage, 1982), 44–49.

131. See Thomas Schatz, *Boom and Bust: The American Cinema in the 1940s* (New York: Scribners, 1997), for an account of these changes.

132. “Once Famous Movie Studio Here Is Formally Taken Over by Army,” *NYT*, September 23, 1942, 27.

133. *Ibid.*

134. Sample films included *All That Jazz* (Astoria), *The Exorcist* (Fox), *Baby Doll* (Vitagraph), and *A Face in the Crowd* (Biograph). Edison was used mainly for industrials and commercials, although the early television series *Man against Crime* and at least one of Alan Freed’s “rock-and-roll” musicals were also shot there. And newer rental stages, like Filmways (*Annie Hall*), were also part of the equation.



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